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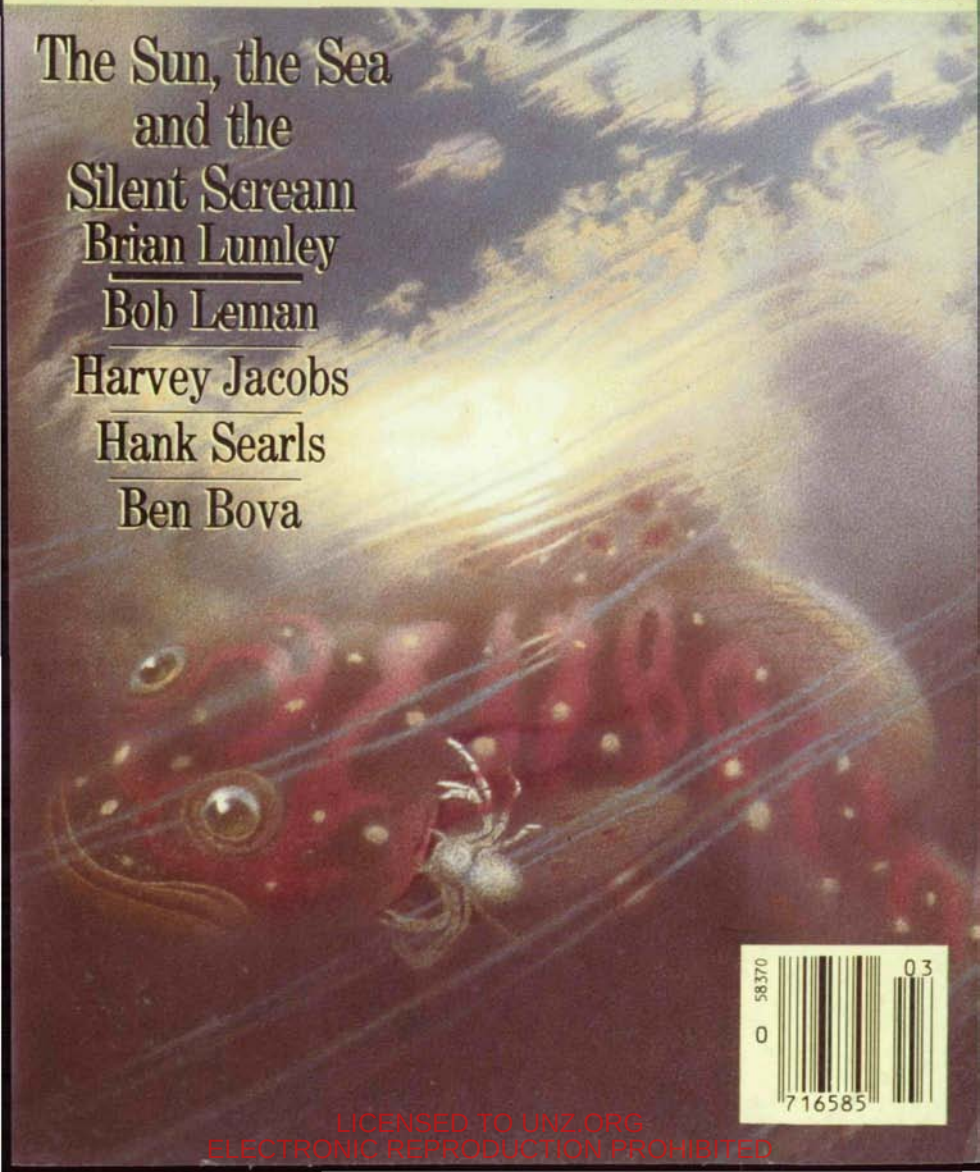

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Brian Lumley is a master of the modern horror story. He writes that he is currently at work on Necroscope III: The Source, *the final novel in his "vampire" trilogy which will be published in Great Britain by Grafton Books. His Arkham House books have seen print in Japan and Spain, and recently he was Guest of Honor at the French SF convention. Here he gives us a story of a vacation gone awry and of creepie-crawlies that will have you shivering and checking your drains.*

THE SUN, THE SEA, AND THE SILENT SCREAM

By Brian Lumley

THIS TIME OF YEAR, JUST as you're recovering from Christmas, they're wont to appear, all unsolicited, *plop* on your welcome mat. I had forgotten that fact, but yesterday I was reminded.

Julie was up first, creating great smells of coffee and frying bacon. And me still in bed, drowsy, thinking how great it was to be nearly back to normal. Three months she'd been out of *that* place, and fit enough now to be first up, running about after me for a change.

Her sweet voice calling upstairs: "Post, darling!" And her slippers flip-flopping out into the porch. Then those long moments of silence — until it dawned on me what she was doing. I knew it instinctively, the way you

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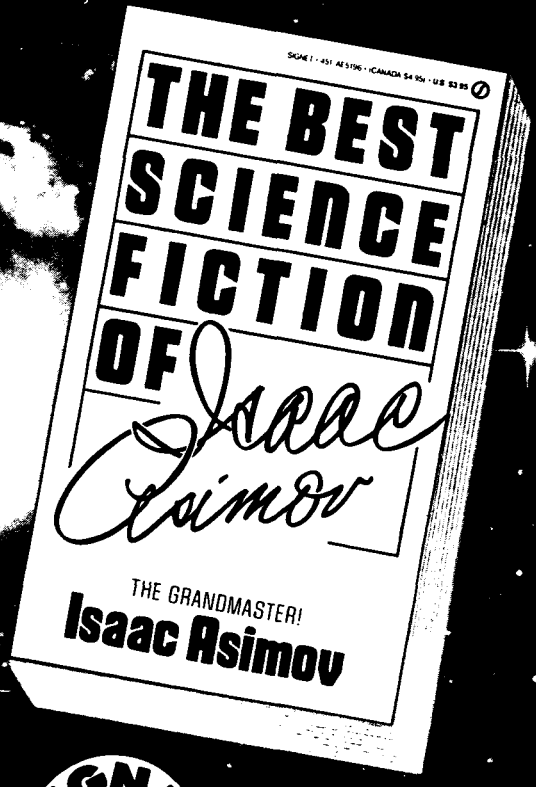

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do about someone you love. She was screaming — but silently. A scream that came drilling into all my bones to shiver into shards right there in the marrow. Me out of bed like a puppet on some madman's strings, jerked downstairs so as to break my neck, while the silent scream went on and on.

And Julie standing there with her head thrown back and her mouth agape and the unending scream not coming out. Her eyes staring out with their pupils rolled down, staring at the thing in her white, shuddering hand—

A travel brochure, of course. . . .

Julie had done Greece fairly extensively with her first husband. That had been five or six years ago, when they'd hoped and tried for kids a lot. No kids had come; she couldn't have them; he'd gone off and found someone who could. No hard feelings. Maybe a few soft feelings.

So when we first started going back to Greece, I'd suggested places they'd explored together. Maybe I was looking for far-away expressions on her face in the sunsets, or a stray tear when a familiar *bousouki* tune drifted out on aromatic taverna exhalations. Somebody had taken a piece of my heart, too, once upon a time; maybe I wanted to know how much of Julie was really mine. As it happened, all of her was.

After we were married, we left the old trails behind and broke fresh ground. That is, we started to find new places to holiday. Twice yearly we'd pack a few things, head for the sunshine, the sea, and sometimes the sand. Sand wasn't always a part of the package, not in Greece. Not the golden or pure white varieties, anyway. But pebbles, marble chips, great brown and black slabs of volcanic rock sloping into the sea — what odds? The sun was always the same, and the sea. . . .

The sea. Anyone who knows the Aegean, the Ionian, the Mediterranean in general, in between and around Turkey and Greece, knows what I mean when I describe those seas as indescribable. Blue, green, mother-of-pearl, turquoise in that narrow band where the sea meets the land: fantastic! Myself, I've always liked the colors *under* the sea the best. That's the big bonus I get, or got, out of the islands: the swimming, the amazing submarine world just beyond the glass of my face mask, the spearfishing.

And this time — last time, the very last time — we settled for Makelos. But don't go looking for it on any maps. You won't find it; much too

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small, and I'm assured that the British don't go there anymore. As a holiday venue, it's been written off. I'd like to think I had something, everything, to do with that, which is why I'm writing this. But a warning: if you're stuck on Greece anyway, and willing to take your chances come what may, read no further. I'd hate to spoil it all for you.

So . . . what am I talking about? Political troubles, unfinished hotel apartments, polluted swimming pools? No, nothing like that. We didn't make that sort of holiday, anyway. We were strictly "off-the-beaten-track" types. Hence Makelos.

We couldn't fly there direct; the island was mainly a flat-topped mountain climbing right out of the water, with a dirt landing strip on the plateau suitable only for Skyvans. So it was a packed jet to Athens, a night on the town, and in the midmorning a flying Greek matchbox the rest of the way. Less than an hour out of Athens and into the Cyclades, descending through a handful of cotton-wool clouds, that was our first sight of our destination.

Less than three miles long, a mile wide — that was it. Makelos. There was a "town," also called Makelos, at one end of the island where twin spurs formed something of a harbor, and the rest of the place around the central plateau was rock and scrub and tiny bays, olive groves galore, almonds and some walnuts, prickly pears and a few lonely lemons. Oh, and lots of wildflowers, so that the air seemed scented.

The year before, there'd been a few apartments available in Makelos town. But towns weren't our scene. This time, however, the island had something new to offer: a lone taverna catering for just three detached, cabin-style apartments, or "villas," all nestling in a valley two miles down the coast from Makelos town itself. Only one or two taxis on the entire island (the coastal road was little more than a track), no fast-food stands, and no packed shingle beaches where the tideless sea would be one-third sun oil and two-thirds tourist pee!

We came down gentle as a feather, taxied up to a windblown shack that turned out to be the airport, deplaned and passed in front of the shack and out the back, and boarded our transport. There were other holiday makers, but we were too excited to pay them much attention; also a handful of dour-faced island Greeks — Makelosians, we guessed. Dour, yes. Maybe that should have told us something about their island.

Our passports had been stamped over the Athens stamp with a local

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variety as we passed through the airport shack, and the official doing the job turned out to be our driver. A busy man, he also introduced himself as the mayor of Makelos! The traction end of our "transport" was a three-wheeler: literally a converted tractor, hauling a four-wheeled trolley with bucket seats bolted to its sides. On the way down from the plateau, I remember thinking we'd never make it; Julie kept her eyes closed for most of the trip; I gave everyone aboard A's for nerve. And the driver-mayor sang a doleful Greek number all the way down.

The town was very old, with nowhere the whitewashed walls you become accustomed to in the islands. Instead, there was an air of desolation about the place. Throw in a few tumbleweeds, and you could shoot a Western there. But fishing boats bobbed in the harbor; leathery Greeks mended nets along the quayside; old men drank muddy coffee at wooden tables outside the taverna, and bottles of Metaxa and ouzo were very much in evidence. Crumbling fortified walls of massive thickness proclaimed, however inarticulately, a onetime Crusader occupation.

Once we'd trundled to a halt in the town's square, the rest of the passengers were home and dry; Julie and I still had a mile and a half to go. Our taxi driver (transfer charges both ways, six pounds sterling: I'd wondered why it was so cheap!) collected our luggage from the tractor's trolley, stowed it away, waited for us while we dusted ourselves down and stretched our legs. Then we got into his "taxi."

I won't impugn anyone's reputation by remarking on the make of that old bus; come to think of it. I could possibly *make* someone's name, for anywhere else in the world, this beauty would have been off the road in the late sixties! Inside — it was a shrine, of course. The Greek sort, with good-luck charms, pictures of the saints, photos of Mom and Dad, and iconlike miniatures in silver frames, hanging and jangling everywhere. And even enough room for the driver to see through his windshield.

"Nichos," he introduced himself, grave-faced, trying to loosen my arm in its socket with his handshake where he reached back from the driver's seat. And to Julie, seated beside him up front: "Nick!" and he took her hand and bowed his head to kiss it. Fine, except we were already mobile and leaving the town, and holiday makers and villagers alike scattering like clucking hens in all directions in our heavy blue exhaust smoke.

Nichos was maybe fifty, hard to tell: bright brown eyes, hair graying, upward-turned mustache, skin brown as old leather. His nicotine-stained

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teeth and ouzo breath were pretty standard. "A fine old car," I opened, as he jarred us mercilessly on nonexistent suspension down the patchy, pot-holed tarmacadam street.

"Eh?" He raised an eyebrow.

"The car," I answered. "She goes, er, well!"

"Very well, thank you. The car," he apparently agreed.

"Maybe he doesn't speak it too well, darling." Julie was straight-faced.

"Speaks it," Nichos agreed with a nod. Then, registering understanding: "Ah — *speak* it! I am speaking it, yes, only slowly. Very *slooowly!* Then is understanding. Good morning, good evening, welcome to my house — exactly! I am in Athens. Three years. Speaks it much, in Athens."

"Great!" I enthused, without malice. After all, I couldn't speak any Greek.

"You stay at Villas Dimitrios, yes?" He was just passing the time; of course we were staying there; he'd been paid to take us there, hadn't he? And yet at the same time, I'd picked up a note of genuine inquiry, even something of concern in his voice, as if our choice surprised or dismayed him.

"Is it a nice place?" Julie asked.

"Nice?" he repeated her. "Beautiful!" He blew a kiss. "Beautiful sea — for swim, *beautiful!*" Then he shrugged, said: "All Makelos same. But Dimitrios water — water for drink — him not so good. You drinking? O.K. — you drink coke. You drink beer. Drinking water in bottle. Drinking wine — very cheap! Not drinking water. Is big hole in Dimitrios. Deep, er — well? Yes? Water in well bad. All around Dimitrios bad. Good for olives, lemons, no good for the people."

We just about made sense of everything he said, which wasn't quite as easy as I've made it sound here. As for the water situation: that was standard, too. We never drank the local water anyway. "So it's a beautiful place," I said. "Good."

Again he glanced at me over his shoulder, offered another shrug. "Er, beautiful, yes." He didn't seem very sure about it now. The Greeks are notoriously vague.

We were out of Makelos, heading south round the central plateau, kicking up the dust of a narrow road where it had been cut through steep, seaward-sloping strata of yellow-banded, dazzling white rock to run parallel with the sea on our left. We were maybe thirty or forty feet above sea

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level, and down there through bits in the shallow sea cliffs, we were allowed tantalizing glimpses of white pebble beaches scalloping an ocean flat as a millpond. The fishing would be good. Nothing like the south coast of England (no Dover sole basking on a muddy bottom here), but that made it more of a challenge. You had to be *good* to shoot fish here!

I took out a small paper parcel from my pocket and unwrapped it: a pair of gleaming trident spearheads purchased in Athens. With luck these heads should fit my spears. Nichos turned his head. "You like to fish? I catch plenty! *Big* fisherman!" Then that look was back on his face. "You fish in Dimitrios? No eat. You like the fishing — good! Chase him, the fish — shoot, maybe kill — but no eat. O.K.?"

I began to feel worried. Julie, too. She turned to stare at me. I leaned forward, said: "Nichos, what do you mean? Why shouldn't we eat what I catch?"

"My house!" he answered as we turned a bend through a stand of stunted trees. He grinned, pointed.

Above us, the compacted scree slope was green with shrubs and Mediterranean pines. There was a garden set back in ancient, gnarled olives, behind which a row of white-framed windows reflected the late-morning sunlight. The house matched the slope rising around and beyond it, its ocher-tiled roof seeming to melt into the hillside. Higher up there were walled, terraced enclosures; higher still, where the mountain's spur met the sky, goats made gravity-defying silhouettes against the dazzle.

"I show you!" said Nichos, turning right onto a track that wound dizzily through a series of hairpins to the house. We hung on as he drove with practiced ease almost to the front door, parking his taxi in the shade of an olive tree heavy with fruit. Then he was opening doors for us, calling out to his wife: "Katrin — hey, Katrin!"

We stayed an hour. We drank cold beer, ate a delicious sandwich of salami, sliced tomatoes, and goat's milk cheese. We admired the kids, the goats and chickens, the little house. It had been an effective way of changing the subject. And we didn't give Nichos's reticence (was that what it had been, or just poor communications?) another thought until he dropped us off at Villas Dimitrios.

The place was only another mile down the road, as the crow flies. But that coastal road knew how to wind. Still, we could probably have walked it while Katrin made us our sandwiches. And yet the island's natural

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contours kept it hidden from sight until the last moment.

We'd climbed up from the sea by then, maybe a hundred feet, and the road had petered out to little more than a track as we crested the final rise and Nichos applied his brakes. And there we sat in that oven of a car, looking down through its dusty, flyspecked windows on Villas Dimitrios. It was . . . idyllic!

Across the spur where we were parked, the ground dipped fairly steeply to a bay maybe a third of a mile point to point. The bay arms were rocky, formed of the tips of spurs sloping into the sea, but the beach between them was sand. *White* sand, Julie's favorite sort. Give her a book, a white beach, and a little shade, and I could swim all day. The taverna stood almost at the water's edge: a long, low house with a red-tiled roof, fronted by a wooden framework supporting heavy grapevines and masses of bougainvillea. Hazy blue woodsmoke curled up from its chimney, and there was a garden to its rear. Behind the house, separate from it and each other and made private by screening groves of olives, three blobs of shimmering white stone were almost painful to look at. The chalets or "villas."

Nichos merely glanced at it; nothing new to him. He pointed across the tiny valley to its far side. Over there, the scree base went up brown and yellow to the foot of sheer cliffs, where beneath a jutting overhang the shadows were so dark as to be black. It had to be a cave. Something of a track had been worn into the scree, leading to the place under the cliff.

"In there," said Nichos with one of his customary shrugs, "the well. Water, him no good. . . ." His face was very grave.

"The water was poisoned?" Julie prompted him.

"Eh?" he cocked his head, then gave a nod. "*Now* is poison!"

"I don't understand," I said. "What is it" — I indicated the dark blot under the cliff — "over there?"

"The well," he said again. "Down inside the cave. But the water, he had, er — like the crabs, you know? You understand the crabs, in the sea?"

"Of course," Julie told him. "In England we eat them."

He shook his head, looked frustrated. "Here, too," he said. "But *this* thing not crab. Very small." He measured an inch between thumb and forefinger. "And no eat him. Very bad! People were . . . sick. They died. Men came from the government in Athens. They bring, er, chemicals? They put in well. Poison for the crabs." Again his shrug. "Now is O.K. — maybe. But I say, no drink the water."

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Before we could respond, he got out of the car, unloaded our luggage onto the dusty track. I followed him. "You're not taking us down?"

"Going down O.K.," he shrugged, this time apologetically. "Come up again — difficult! Too — how you say?" He made an incline with his hand.

"Too steep?"

"Is right. My car very nice — also very old! I sorry." I picked up the cases; Julie joined us and took the travel bags. Nichos made no attempt to help; instead, he gave a small, awkward bow, said: "You see my house? Got the problem, come speak. Good morning." Then he was into his car. He backed off, turned around, stopped, and leaned out his window. "Hey, mister, lady!"

We looked at him.

He pointed. "Follow road is long way. Go straight down, very easy. Er, how you say — shortcut? So, I go. See you in two weeks."

We watched his tires kicking up dust and grit until he was out of sight. Then:

Taking a closer look at the terrain, I could see he was right. The track followed the ridge of the spur down to a sharp right turn, then down a hard-packed dirt ramp to the floor of the valley. It was steep, but a decent car should make it — even Nichos's taxi, I thought. But if we left the track here and climbed straight down the side of the spur, we'd cut two or three hundred yards off the distance. And actually, even the spur wasn't all that steep. We made it without any fuss, and I sat down only once when my feet shot out from under me.

As we got down onto the level, our host for the next fortnight came banging and clattering from the direction of the taverna, bumping over the rough scrub in a Greek three-wheeler with a cart at the back. Dimitrios wore a wide-brimmed hat against the sun, but still he was sweating just as badly as we were. He wiped his brow as he dumped our luggage into his open-ended cart. We hitched ourselves up at the rear and sat with our feet dangling. And he drove us to our chalet.

We were hot and sticky, all three of us, and maybe it wasn't so strange we didn't talk. Or perhaps he could see our discomfort and preferred that we get settled in before turning on the old Greek charm. Anyway, we said nothing as he opened the door for us, gave me the key, helped me carry our bags into the cool interior. I followed him back outside again while Julie got to the ritual unpacking.

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"Hot," he said then. "Hot, the sun. . . ." Greeks have this capacity for stating the obvious. Then, carrying it to extreme degrees, he waved an arm in the direction of the beach, the sea, and the taverna. "Beach. Sea. Taverna. For swimming. Eating. I have the food, drinks. I also selling the food for you the cooking. . . ." The chalet came with its own self-catering kit.

"Fine," I smiled. "See you later."

He stared at me a moment, his eyes like dull lights in the dark shadow of his hat, then made a vague sort of motion halfway between a shrug and a nod. He got back aboard his vehicle and started her up, and as his clatter died away, I went back inside and had a look around.

Julie was filling a pair of drawers with spare clothing, at the same time building a teetering pyramid of reading material on a chair. Where books were concerned, she was voracious. She was like that about me, too. No complaints here.

Greek island accommodation varies from abominable to half decent. Or, if you're willing to shell out, you might be lucky enough to get good —but rarely better than that. The Villas Dimitrios chalets were . . . well, O.K. But we'd paid for it, so it's what we expected.

I checked the plumbing first. Greek island plumbing is never better than basic. The bathroom was tastefully but totally tiled, even the ceiling! No bathtub, but a good shower and, at the other end of the small room, the toilet and washbasin. Enclosed in tiles, you could shower and let the water spray where-the-heck; if it didn't end up in the shower basin, it would end up on the floor, which sloped gently from all directions to one corner where there was a hole going — where? That's the other thing about Greek plumbing: I've never been able to figure out where everything goes.

But the bathroom did have its faults: like, there were no plugs for the washbasin and shower drainage, and no grilles in the plugholes. I suppose I'm quirky, but I like to see a grille in there, not just a black hole gurgling away to nowhere. It was the same in the little "kitchen" (an alcove under an arch, really, with a sink and drainer unit, a two-ring gas cookstove, a cupboard containing the cylinder, and a wall-mounted rack for crockery and cutlery; all very nice and serviceable and equipped with a concealer overhead fan-extractor) — no plug in the sink and no grille in the plughole.

I complained loudly to Julie about it.

"Don't put your toe down and you won't get stuck!" was her advice from the bedroom.

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"Toe down?" I was already miles away, looking for the shaver socket.

"Down the shower plughole," she answered. And she came out of the bedroom wearing sandals and the bottom half of her bikini. I made slavering noises, and she turned coyly, tossed back her bra straps for me to fasten. "Do me up."

"You were quick off the mark," I told her.

"All packed away, too," she said with some satisfaction. "And the big white hunter's kit neatly laid out for him. And all performed free of charge — while he examines plugholes!" Then she picked up a towel and tube of lotion and headed for the door. "Last one in the sea's a pervert!"

FIVE MINUTES later I followed her. She'd picked a spot half-way between the chalet and the most northernly bay arm. Her red towel was like a splash of blood on the white sand two hundred yards north of the taverna. I carried my mask, snorkel, flippers, some strong string, and a tatty old blanket with torn corners; that was all. No spear gun. First I'd take a look-see, and the serious stuff could come later. Julie obviously felt the same as I about it: no book, just a slim, pale white body on the red towel, green eyes three-quarters shuttered behind huge sunglasses. She was still wet from the sea, but that wouldn't last long. The sun was a furnace, steaming the water off her body.

On my way to her, I'd picked up some long, thin, thorny branches from the scrub; when I got there, I broke off the thorns and fixed up a sunshade. The old blanket's torn corners showed how often we'd done this before. Then I took my kit to the water's edge and dropped it, and ran gasping, pell-mell into the shallows until I toppled over! My way of getting into the sea quickly. Following which I outfitted myself and finned for the rocks where the spur dipped below the water.

As I've intimated, the Mediterranean around the Greek islands is short on fish. You'll find red mullet on the bottom, plenty of them, but you need half a dozen to make a decent meal. And gray mullet on top, which moved like lightning and cause you to use up more energy than eating them provides; great sport, but you couldn't live on it. But there's at least one fish of note in the Med, and that's the grouper.

Groupers are territorial; a family will mark out its own patch, usually in deep water where there's plenty of cover, which is to say rock or weeds. And they love caves. Where there are plenty of rocks and caves, there'll

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also be groupers. Here, where the spur crumbled into the sea, this was ideal grouper ground. So I wasn't surprised to see this one — especially since I didn't have my gun! Isn't that always the way of it?

He was all of twenty-four inches long, maybe seven across his back, mottled red and brown to match his cave. When he saw me, he headed straight for home, and I made a mental note to mark the spot. Next time I came out here, I'd have my gun with me, armed with a single flap-nosed spear. The spear goes into the fish, the flap opens, and he's hooked, can't slip off. Tridents are fine for small fish, but not for this bloke. And don't talk to me about cruel; if I'm cruel, so is every fisherman in the world, and at least I eat what I catch. But it was then, while I was thinking these things, that I noticed something was wrong.

The fish had homed in on his cave, all right, but as his initial reaction to my presence wore off, so his spurt of speed diminished. Now he seemed merely to drift toward the dark hole in the rock, lolling from side to side like some strange, crippled sub, actually missing his target to strike *against* the weedy stone! It was the first time I'd ever seen a fish collide with something underwater. This was one very sick grouper.

I went down to have a closer look. He was maybe ten feet down, just lolling against the rock face. His huge gill flaps pulsed open and closed, open and closed. I could have reached out and touched him. Then, as he rolled a little on one side, I saw—

I backed off, felt a little sick — felt sorry for him. And I wished I had my gun with me, if only to put him out of his misery. Under his great head, wedging his gill slits half open, a nest of fish lice or parasites of some sort were plainly visible. Not lampreys or remora or the like, for they were too small, only as big as my thumbs. Crustaceans, I thought — a good dozen of them — and they were hooked into him, leeching on the raw red flesh under his gills.

God, I have a *loathing* of this sort of thing! Once in Crete I'd come out of the sea with a suckerfish in my armpit. I hadn't noticed it until I was toweling myself dry and it fell off me. It was only three or four inches long, but I'd reacted like I was covered with leeches! I had that same feeling now.

Skin crawling, I drifted up and away from the stricken fish, and for the first time got a good look at his eyes. They were dull, glazed, bubbly as the eyes of fatally diseased goldfish. And they followed me. And then *he* followed me!

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As I floated feetfirst for the surface, that damned grouper finned lethargically from the rocks and began drifting up after me. Several of his parasites had detached themselves from him and floated alongside him, gravitating like small satellites about his greater mass. I pictured one of them with its hooked feet fastened in my groin, or over one of my eyes. I mean, I knew they couldn't do that — their natural hosts are fish — but the thoughts made me feel vulnerable as hell.

I took off like Tarzan for the beach twenty-five yards away, climbed shivering out of the water in the shadow of the declining spur. As soon as I was out, the shudders left me. Along the beach my sunshade landmark was still there, flapping a little in a light breeze come up suddenly off the sea; but no red towel, no Julie. She could be swimming. Or maybe she'd felt thirsty and gone for a drink under the vines where the taverna fronted onto the sea.

Kit in hand, I padded along the sand at the dark rim of the ocean, past the old blanket tied with string to its frame of branches, all the way to the taverna. The area under the vines was maybe fifty feet along the front by thirty deep, a concrete base set out with a dozen small tables and chairs. Dimitrios was being a bit optimistic here, I thought. After all, it was the first season his place had been in the brochures. But . . . maybe next year there'd be more chalets, and the canny Greek owner was simply thinking well ahead.

I gave the place the once-over. Julie wasn't there, but at least I was able to get my first real look at our handful of fellow holiday makers.

A fat woman in a glaring yellow one-piece splashed in eighteen inches of water a few yards out. She kept calling to her husband, one George, to come on in. George sat half in, half out of the shade; he was a thin, middle-aged, balding man not much browner than myself, wearing specs about an inch thick that made his eyes look like marbles. "No, no, dear," he called back. "I'm fine watching you." He looked frail, timid, tired — and I thought: *Where the hell are marriages like this made!* They were like characters off a British seaside postcard, except he didn't even seem to have the strength to ogle the girls — if there'd been any! His wife was twice his size.

George was drinking beer from a glass. A bottle, three-quarters empty and beaded with droplets of moisture, stood on his table. I fancied a drink but had no money on me. Then I saw that George was looking at me, and I

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felt that he'd caught me spying on him or something. "I was wondering," I said, covering up my rudeness, "if you'd seen my wife? She was on the beach there, and—"

"Gone back to your chalet," he said, sitting up a bit in his chair. "The girl with the red towel?" And suddenly he looked just a bit embarrassed. So he was an ogler after all. "Er, while you were in the sea. . . ." He took off his specs and rubbed gingerly at a large red bump on the lid of his right eye. Then he put his glasses on again, blinked at me, held out the beer bottle. "Fancy a mouthful? To wash the sea out of your throat? I've had all I want."

I took the bottle, drained it, said: "Thanks! Bite?"

"Eh?" He cocked his head on one side.

"Your eye," I said. "Mosquito, was it? Horsefly or something?"

"Dunno." He shook his head. "We got here Wednesday, and by Thursday night this was coming up. Yesterday morning it was like this. Doesn't hurt so much as irritates. There's another back of my knee, not fully in bloom yet."

"Do you have stuff to dab on?"

He nodded in the direction of his wallowing wife and sighed, "She has *gallons* of it! Useless stuff! It will just have to take its own time."

"Look, I'll see you later," I said. "Right now I have to go and see what's up with Julie." I excused myself.

Leaving the place, I nodded to a trio of spinsterish types relaxing in summer frocks at one of the tables farther back. They looked like sisters, and the one in the middle might just be a little retarded. She kept lolling first one way, then the other, while her companions propped her up. I caught a few snatches of disjointed, broad Yorkshire conversation:

"Doctor? . . . sunstroke, I reckon. Or maybe that melon? . . . taxi into town will fix her up . . . bit of shopping . . . pull her out of it . . . Kalamari? — *yechhh!* Don't know what decent grub is, these foreign folks. . . ." They were so wrapped up in each other, or in complaint of the one in the middle, that they scarcely noticed me at all.

On the way back to our chalet, at the back of the house/taverna, I looked across low walls and a row of exotic potted plants to see an old Greek (male or female I couldn't determine, because of the almost obligatory floppy black hat tilted forward and flowing black peasant clothes) sitting in a cane chair in one corner of the garden. He or she sat dozing in the shade of an olive tree, chin on chest, all oblivious of the world out-

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side the tree's sun-dappled perimeter. A pure white goat, just a kid, was tethered to the tree; it nuzzled the oldster's dangling fingers like they were teats. Julie was daft for young animals, and I'd have to tell her about it. As for the figure in the cane chair: he/she had been there when Julie and I went down to the beach. Well, getting old in this climate had to be better than doing it in some climates I could mention. . . .

I found Julie in bed, shivering for all she was worth! She was patchy red where the sun had caught her, cold to the touch but filmed with perspiration. I took one look, recognized the symptoms, said: "Oh-oh! Last night's moussaka, eh? You should have had the chicken!" Her tummy *always* fell prey to moussaka, be it good or bad. But she usually recovered quickly, too.

"Came on when I was on the beach," she said. "I left the blanket. . . ."

"I saw it," I told her. "I'll go get it." I gave her a kiss.

"Just let me lie here and close my eyes for a minute or two, and I'll be O.K.," she mumbled. "An *hour* or two, anyway." And as I was going out the door: "Jim, this isn't Nichos's bad water, is it?"

I turned back. "Did you drink any?"

She shook her head.

"Got crabs?"

She was too poorly to laugh, so merely snorted.

I pocketed some money. "I'll get the blanket, buy some bottled drinks. You'll have something to sip. And then . . . will you be O.K. if I go fishing?"

She nodded. "Of course. You'll see; I'll be on my feet again tonight."

"Anyway, you should see the rest of them here," I told her. "Three old sisters, and one of 'em not all there — a little man and fat woman straight off a postcard! Oh, and I've a surprise for you."

"Oh?"

"When you're up," I smiled. I was talking about the white kid. Tonight or tomorrow morning I'd show it to her.

Feeling a bit let down — not by Julie but by circumstances in general, even by the atmosphere of this place, which was somehow odd — I collected the sunscreen blanket and poles, marched resolutely back to the taverna. Dimitrios was serving drinks to the spinsters. The "sunstruck" one had recovered a little, sipped Coke through a straw. George and his burden were nowhere to be seen. I sat down at one of the tables, and in a little while, Dimitrios came over. This time I studied him more closely.

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He was youngish, maybe thirty, thirty-five, tall if a little stooped. He was more swarthy peasant Greek than classical or cosmopolitan; his natural darkness, coupled with the shadow of his hat (which he wore even here in the shade), hid his face from any really close inspection. The one very noticeable thing about that face, however was this: it didn't smile. That's something you get to expect in the islands, the flash of teeth. Even badly stained ones. But not Dimitrios's teeth.

His hands wre burned brown, lean, almost scrawny. Be that as it may, I felt sure they'd be strong hands. As for his eyes: they were the sort that make you look away. I tried to stare at his face a little while, then looked away. I wasn't afraid, just concerned. But I didn't know what about.

"Drink?" he said, making it sound like "dring." "Melon? The melon he is free. I give. I grow plenty. You like him? And water? I bring half-melon and water."

He turned to go, but I stopped him. "Er, no!" I remembered the conversation of the spinsters, about the melon. "No melon, no water, thank you." I tried to smile at him, found it difficult. "I'll have a cold beer. Do you have bottled water? You know, in the big plastic bottles? And Coke? Two of each, for the refrigerator. O.K.?"

He shrugged, went off. There was this lethargy about him, almost a malaise. No, I didn't much care for him at all. . . .

"Swim!" the excited voice of one of the spinsters reached me. "Right along there, at the end of the beach. Like yesterday. Where there's no one to peep."

God! You'll be lucky, I thought.

"Shh!" one of her sisters hushed her, as if a crowd of rapacious men were listening to every word. *"Don't tell the whole world, Betty!"*

A Greek girl, Dimitrios's sister or wife, came out of the house carrying a plastic bag. She came to my table, smiled at me — a little nervously, I thought. "The water, the Coke," she said, making each definite article sound like "thee." *But at least she can speak my language,* I had to keep reminding myself. "Four hundred drachmas, please," she said. I nodded and paid up. About two pounds sterling. Cheap, considering it all had to be brought here from the mainland. The bag and the bottles inside it were tingling cold in my hand.

I stood up — and the girl was still there, barring my way. The three sisters made off down the beach, and there was no one else about. The girl

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glanced over her shoulder toward the house. The hand she put on my arm was trembling, and now I could see that it wasn't just nervousness. She was afraid.

"Mister," she said, the word very nearly sticking in her dry throat. She swallowed and tried again. "Mister, please. I—"

"Elli!" a low voice called. In the doorway to the house, dappled by splashes of sunlight through the vines, Dimitrios.

"Yes?" I answered her. "Is there—?"

"*Elli!*" he called again, an unspoken warning turning the word to a growl.

"Is all right," she whispered, her pretty face suddenly thin and pale. "Is — nothing!" And then she almost ran back to the house.

Weirder and weirder! But if they had some husband-and-wife thing going, it was no business of mine. I'm no Clint Eastwood — and they're a funny lot, the Greeks, in an argument.

On my way back to the chalet, I looked again into the garden. The figure in black, head slumped on chest, sat there as before; it hadn't moved an inch. The sun had, though, and was burning more fiercely down on the drowsing figure in black. The white kid had got loose from its tether and was on its hind legs, eating amazing scarlet flowers out of their tub. "You'll get hell, mate," I muttered, "when he/she wakes up!"

There were a lot of flies about. I swatted at a cloud of the ugly, buzzing little bastards as I hurried, dripping perspiration, back to the chalet.

Inside, I took a long drink myself, then poured ice-cold water into one glass, Coke into another. I put both glasses on a bedside table within easy reach of Julie, stored the rest of the stuff in the fridge. She was asleep: bad belly complicated by a mild attack of sunstroke. I should have insisted that Nichos bring us right to the door. He could have, I was sure. Maybe he and Dimitrios had a feud or something going. But . . . Julie was sleeping peacefully enough, and the sweat was off her brow.

Someone tut-tutted, and I was surprised to find it was I. Hey! — this was supposed to be a holiday, wasn't it?

I sighed, took up my kit — including the gun — went back into the sun. On impulse I'd picked up the key. I turned it in the lock, withdrew it, stooped, and slid it under the door. She could come out, but no one could go in. If she wasn't awake when I got back, I'd simply hook the key out again with a twig.

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But right now it was time for some serious fishing!

There was a lot of uneasiness building up inside me, but I put it all out of my head (what was it anyway but a set of unsettling events and queer coincidences?) and marched straight down to the sea. The beach was empty here, not a soul in sight. No, wrong: at the far end, near the foot of the second spur, two of the sisters splashed in the shallows in faded bathing costumes twenty years out of date, while the third one sat on the sand watching them. They were all of two or three hundred yards away, however, so I wouldn't be accused of ogling them.

In a little while I was outfitted, in the water, heading straight out to where the sandy bottom sloped off a little more steeply. At about eight or nine feet, I saw an octopus in his house of shells — a big one, too, all coiled pink tentacles and cat eyes wary — but in a little while I moved on. Normally I'd have taken him, gutted him and beaten the grease out of him, then handed him in to the local taverna for goodwill. But on this occasion that would be Dimitrios. Sod Dimitrios!

At about twelve feet the bottom leveled out. In all directions I saw an even expanse of golden, gently rippled sand stretching away: beautiful but boring. And not a fish in sight! Then . . . the silvery flash of a belly turned side-on — no, two of them, three! — caught my eye. Not on the bottom but on the surface. Gray mullet, and of course they'd seen me before I saw them. I followed their darting shapes anyway, straight out to sea as before.

In a little while a reef of dark, fretted rocks came in view. It seemed fairly extensive, ran parallel to the beach. There was some weed but not enough to interfere with visibility. And the water still only twelve to fifteen feet deep. Things were looking up.

If a man knows the habits of his prey, he can catch him, and I knew my business. The gray mullet will usually run, but if you can surprise him, startle him, he'll take cover. If no cover's available, then he just keeps on running, and he'll very quickly outpace any man. But here in this pock-marked reef, there *was* cover. To the fish, it would seem that the holes in the rocks were a refuge, but in fact they'd be a trap. I went after them with a will, putting everything I'd got into the chase.

Coming up fast behind the fish, and making all the noise I could, I saw a central school of maybe a dozen small ones, patrolled by three or four full-grown outriders. The latter had to be two-pounders if they were an ounce. They panicked, scattered; the smaller fish shot off in all directions,

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and their big brothers went to ground! Exactly as I'd hoped they would. Two into one outcrop of honeycombed rock, and two into another.

I trod water on the surface, getting my breath, making sure the rubbers of my gun weren't tangled with the loose line from the spear, keeping my eyes glued to the silvery gray shapes finning nervously to and fro in the hollow rocks. I picked my target, turned on end, thrust my legs up, and let my own weight drive me to the bottom; and as my impetus slowed, so I lined up on one of the two poles. Right on cue, one of the fish appeared. He never knew what hit him.

I surfaced, freed my vibrating prize from the trident where two of the tines had taken him behind the gills, hung him from a gill ring on my belt. By now his partner had made off, but the other pair of fish was still there in the second hole. I quickly reloaded, made a repeat performance. My first hunt of the season, and already I had two fine fish! I couldn't wait to get back and show them to Julie.

I was fifty yards out. Easing the strain on muscles that were a whole year out of practice, I swam lazily back to the beach and came ashore close to the taverna. Way along the beach, two of the sisters were putting their dresses on over their ancient costumes, while the third sat on the sand with her head lolling. Other than these three, no one else was in sight.

I made for the chalet. As I went, the sun steamed the water off me and I began to itch; it was time I took a shower, and I might try a little protective after-sun lotion, too. Already my calves were turning red, and I supposed my back must be in the same condition. Ugly now, but in just a few days' time. . . .

Passing the garden behind the house, this time I didn't look in. The elderly person under the tree would be gone by now, I was sure; but I did hear the lonely bleating of the kid.

Then I saw Dimitrios. He was up on the roof of the central chalet, and from where I padded silently between the olives, I could see him lifting a metal hatch on a square water tank. The roofs were also equipped with solar panels. So the sun heated the water, but . . . where did the water come from? Idiot question, even to oneself! From a well, obviously. But which well?

I passed under the cover of a clump of trees, and the Greek was lost to sight. When I came out again into the open, I saw him descending a ladder

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propped against the chalet's wall. He carried a large galvanized bucket —empty, to judge from its swing and bounce. He hadn't seen me, and for some hard-to-define reason, I didn't want him to. I ran the rest of the way to our chalet.

The door was open; Julie was up and about in shorts and a halter. She greeted me with a kiss, *oohed* and *aahed* at my catch. "Supper," I told her with something of pride. "No moussaka tonight. Fresh fish done over charcoal, with a little Greek salad and a filthy bottle of retsina — or maybe two filthy great bottles!"

I cleaned the fish in the toilet, flushed their guts away. Then I washed them, tossed some ice into the sink unit, and put the fish in the ice. I didn't want them to stiffen up in the fridge, and they'd keep well enough in the sink for a couple of hours.

"Now you stink of fish," Julie told me without ceremony. "Your forearms are covered in scales. Take a shower and you'll feel great. I did."

"Are you O.K.?" I held her with my eyes.

"Fine now, yes," she said. "System flushed while you were out — you don't wish to know that — and now the old tum's settled down nicely, thank you. It was just the travel, the sun—"

"The moussaka?"

"That, too, probably." She sighed. "I just wish I didn't love it so!"

I stripped and stepped into the shower basin, fiddled with the knobs. "What'll you do while I shower?"

"Turn 'em both on full," she instructed. "Hot and cold both. Then the temperature's just right. Me? I'll go and sit in the shade by the sea, start a book."

"In the taverna?" Maybe there was something in the tone of my voice.

"Yes. Is that O.K.?"

"Fine," I told her, steeling myself and spinning the taps on. I didn't want to pass my apprehension on to her. "I'll see you there — *ahh!* — shortly." And after that, for the next ten minutes, it was all hissing, stinging jets of water and blinding streams of medicated shampoo. . . .

Toweling myself dry, I heard the clattering on the roof. Maintenance? Dimitrios and his galvanized bucket? I dressed quickly in lightweight flannels and a shirt, flip-flops on my feet, went out, and locked the door. Other places like this, we'd left the door open. Here I locked it. At the back of the chalet, Dimitrios was coming down his ladder. I came round

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the corner as he stepped down. If anything, he'd pulled his hat even lower over his eyes, so that his face was just a blot of shadow with two faint smudges of light for eyes. He was lethargic as ever, possibly even more so. We stood looking at each other.

"Trouble?" I eventually ventured.

Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. "No troubles," he said, his voice a gurgle. "I just see all O.K." He put his bucket down, wiped his hands on his trousers.

"And is it?" I took a step closer. "I mean, is it all O.K.?"

He nodded and at last grinned. Briefly a bar of whiteness opened in the shadow of his hat. "Now is O.K.," he said. And he picked up his bucket and moved off away from me.

Surly bastard! I thought. And: *What a dump! God, but we've slipped up this time, Julie, my love!*

I started toward the taverna, remembered I had no cigarettes with me, and returned to the chalet. Inside, in the cool and shade, I wondered what Dimitrios had been putting in the water tanks. Some chemical solution, maybe? To purify or purge the system? Well, I didn't want my system purified, not by Dimitrios. I flushed the toilet again. And I left the shower running full blast for all of five minutes before spinning the taps back to the off position. I would have done the same to the sink unit, but my fish were in there, the ice almost completely melted away. And emptying another tray of ice into the sink, I snapped my fingers: *Hah!* A blow for British eccentricity!

By the time I got to the taverna, Dimitrios had disappeared, probably inside the house. He'd left his bucket standing on the garden wall. Maybe it was simple curiosity, maybe something else; I don't know — but I looked into the bucket. Empty. I began to turn away, looked again. No, not empty, but almost. Only a residue remained. At the bottom of the bucket, a thin film of . . . jelly? That's what it looked like: gray jelly.

I began to dip a finger. Hesitated, thought: *What the hell! It's nothing harmful.* It couldn't be, or he wouldn't be putting it in the water tanks. Would he? I snorted at my mind's morbid fancies. Surly was one thing, but homicidal—?

I dipped, held my finger up to the sun where that great blazing orb slipped down toward the plateau's rim. Squinting, I saw . . . just a blob of goo. Except — black dots were moving in it, like microscopic tadpoles.

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"My husband needs a doctor! His lumps are moving. Things are alive under his skin!"

Urgh! I wiped the slime off my finger onto the rough concrete of the wall. Wrong bucket, obviously, for something had gone decidedly wrong in this one. Backing uncertainly away, I heard the doleful bleating of the white kid.

Across the garden, he was chewing on the frayed end of a rope hanging from the corner of a tarpaulin where it had been thrown roughly over the chair under the olive tree. The canvas had peaked in the middle, so that it seemed someone with a pointed head was still sitting there. I stared hard, felt a tic starting up at the corner of my eye. And suddenly I knew that I didn't want to be here. I didn't want it one little bit. And I wanted Julie to be here even less.

Coming round the house to the seating area under the vines, it became noisily apparent that I wasn't the only disenchanted guest around here. An angry, booming female voice, English, seemed matched against a chattering wall of machine-gun-fire Greek. I stepped quickly in under the vines and saw Julie sitting in the shade at the ocean's edge, facing the sea. A book lay open on her table. She looked back over her shoulder, saw me, and even though she wasn't involved in the exchange, still relief flooded over her face.

I went to her, said, "What's up?" She looked past me, directing her gaze toward the rear of the seating area.

In the open door of the house, Dimitrios made a hunched silhouette, stiff as a petrified tree stump; his wife was a pale shadow behind him, in what must be the kitchen. Facing the Greek, George's wife stood with her fists on her hips, jaw jutting. "How *dare* you?" she cried, outraged at something or other. "What do you mean, you can't help? No phone? Are you actually telling me there's no telephone? Then how are we to contact civilization? I have to speak to someone in the town, find a doctor. My husband, George, *needs* a doctor! Can't you understand that? His lumps are moving. *Things are alive under his skin!*"

I heard all of this, but failed to take it in at once. George's lumps moving? Did she mean they were spreading? And still, Dimitrios stood there, while his wife squalled shrilly at him (at *him*, yes, not at George's

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wife as I'd first thought) and tried to squeeze by him. Whatever was going on here, someone had to do something, and it looked like I was the one.

"Sit tight," I told Julie, and I walked up behind the furious fat lady. "Something's wrong with George?" I said.

All eyes turned in my direction. I still couldn't see Dimitrios's face too clearly, but I sensed a sudden wariness in him. George's wife pounced on me. "Do you know George?" she said, grasping my arm. "Oh, of course! I saw you talking to him when I was in the sea."

I gently pried her sweaty, iron-band fingers from my arm. "His lumps," I pressed. "Do you mean those swollen stings of his? Are they worse?"

"Stings?" I could see now that her hysteria had brought her close to the point of tears. "Is that what they are? Well, God only knows what stung him! Some of them are opening, and there's movement in the wounds! And George just lies there, without the will to do anything. He must be in agony, but he says he can't feel a thing. There's something terribly wrong. . . ."

"Can I see him?"

"Are you a doctor?" She grabbed me again.

"No, but if I could see how bad it is—"

"— A waste of *time!*" she cut me off. "He needs a doctor now!"

"I take you to Makelos." Dimitrios had apparently snapped out of his rigor mortis mode, taken a jerky step toward us. "I take, find doctor, come back in taxi."

She turned to him. "Will you? Oh, *will* you, really? Thank you, oh, thank you! But . . . *how* will you take me?"

"Come," he said. They walked round the building to the rear, followed the wall until it ended, crossed the scrub to a clump of olives, and disappeared into the trees. I went with them part of the way, then watched them out of sight: Dimitrios stiff as a robot, never looking back, and Mrs. George rumbling along massively behind him. A moment later there came the clattering and banging of an engine, and his three-wheeler bumped into view. It made for the packed-dirt incline to the road where it wound up the spur. Inside, Dimitrios at the wheel behind a flyspecked windshield, almost squeezed into the corner of the tiny cab by the fat lady where she hunched beside him.

Julie had come up silently behind me. I gave a start when she said: "Do you think we should maybe go and see if this George is O.K.?"

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I took a grip of myself, shrugged, said: "I was speaking to him just — oh, an hour and a half ago. He can't have got really bad in so short a time, can he? A few horsefly bites, he had. Nasty enough, but you'd hardly consider them as serious as all that. She's just got herself a bit hot and bothered, that's all."

Quite suddenly, shadows reached down to us from the high brown and purple walls of the plateau. The sun had commenced to sink behind the island's central hump. In a moment it was degrees cooler, so that I found myself shivering. In that same moment the cicadas stopped their frying-fat onslaught of sound, and a strange silence fell over the whole place. On impulse, quietly, I said: "We're out of here tomorrow."

That was probably a mistake. I hadn't wanted to get Julie going. She'd been in bed most of the time; she hadn't experienced the things I had, hadn't felt so much of the strangeness here. Or maybe she had, for now she said: "Good," and gave a little shudder of her own. "I was going to suggest just that. I'm sure we can find cheap lodging in Makelos. And this place is such — I don't know — such a dead and alive hole! I mean, it's beautiful — but it's also very ugly. There's just something morbid about it."

"Listen," I said, deciding to lighten the atmosphere if I could. "I'll tell you what we'll do. You go back to the taverna, and I'll go get the fish. We'll have the Greek girl cook them for us and dish them up with a little salad — and a bottle of retsina, as we'd planned. Maybe things will look better after a bite to eat, eh? Is your tummy up to it?"

She smiled faintly in the false dusk, leaned forward, and gave me a kiss. "You know," she said, "whenever you start worrying about me — and using *that* tone of voice — I always know that there's something you're worrying about yourself. But actually, you know, I do feel quite hungry!"

The shadows had already reached the taverna. Just shadows — in no way night, for it wasn't properly evening yet, though certainly the contrast was a sort of darkness — and beyond them the vast expanse of the sea was blue as ever, sparkling silver at its rim in the brilliant sunlight still striking there. The strangeness of the place seemed emphasized, enlarged....

I watched Julie turn right and disappear into the shade of the vines, and then I went for our fish.

The real nightmare began when I let myself into the chalet and went to the sink unit. Doubly shaded, the interior really was quite dark. I put

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on the light in the arched-over alcove that was the kitchen, and picked up the two fish, one in each hand — and dropped them, or rather tossed them back into the sink! The ice was all melted; the live-looking glisten of the scales had disappeared with the ice, and the mullets themselves had been — infected!

Attached to the gill flap of one of them, I'd seen a parasite exactly like the ones on the big grouper; the second fish had had one of the filthy things clamped half over a filmed eye. My hair actually prickled on my head; my scalp tingled; my lips drew back from my teeth in a silent snarl. The things were something like sheep ticks, in design if not in dimension, but they were pale, blind, spiky, and hooked, infinitely more loathesome. They were only — crustaceans? Insects? I couldn't be sure — but there was that about them which made them more horrific to me than any creature has a right to be.

Anyone who believes you can't go cold, break out in gooseflesh, on a hot, late afternoon in the Mediterranean is mistaken. I went so cold I was shaking, and I kept on shaking for long moments, until it dawned on me that just a few seconds ago, I'd actually handled these fish!

Christ!

I turned on the hot tap, thrust my hands forward to receive the cleansing stream, snatched them back again. God, no! I couldn't wash them, for Dimitrios had been up there putting something in the tank! Some kind of spawn. But that didn't make sense: hot water would surely kill the things. If there was any hot water. . . .

The plumbing rattled, but no hot water came. Not only had Dimitrios interfered with the water, introduced something into it, but he'd also made sure that from now we could use only the *cold* water!

I wiped my trembling hands thoroughly on sheets from a roll of paper towel, filled the kettle with water from a refrigerated bottle, quickly brought the water toward boiling. Before it became unbearable, I gritted my teeth, poured a little hot water first over one hand, then the other. It stung like hell, and the flesh of my hands went red at once, but I just hugged them and let them sting. Then, when the water was really boiling, I poured the rest of the contents of the kettle over the fish in the sink.

By that time the parasites had really dug themselves in. The one attached to the gill flap had worked its way under the gill, making it bulge; the other had dislodged its host's eye and was half way into the skull.

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Worse, another had clawed its way up the plughole and was just now emerging into the light! The newcomer was white, whereas the others were now turning pink from the ingestion of fish juices.

But up from the plughole! This set me shuddering again; and again I wondered: *What's down there, down in the slop under the ground? Where does everything go?*

These fish had been clean when I caught them; I'd gutted them, and so I ought to know. But their scent had drawn these things up to the feast. Would the scent of human flesh attract them the same way?

As the boiling water hit them, the things popped like crabs tossed into a cooking pot. They seemed to hiss and scream, but it was just the rapid expansion and explosion of their tissues. And the stench that rose up from the sink was nauseating. God ! — would I ever eat fish again?

And the thought kept repeating over and over in my head: What was down below?

I went to the shower recess, put on the light, looked in, and at once shrank back. The sunken bowl of the shower was crawling with them! Two, three dozen of them at least. And the toilet? And the cold-water system? And all the rest of the bloody plumbing? There'd be a cesspit down there, and these things were alive in it in their thousands! And the maniac Dimitrios had been putting their eggs in the water tanks!

But what about the spinsters? They had been here before us, probably for the past three or four days at least. And what about George? George and his lumps! And Julie: she wouldn't have ordered anything yet, would she! She wouldn't have *eaten* anything!

I left the door of the chalet slamming behind me, raced for the taverna.

The sun was well down now, with the bulk of the central mountain throwing all of the eastern coastline into shadow; halfway to the horizon, way out to sea, the sun's light was a line ruled across the ocean, beyond which silver-flecked blueness seemed to reach up to the sky. And moment by moment the ruled line of deeper blue flowed eastward as the unseen sun dipped even lower. On the other side of the island, the west coast, it would still be sweltering hot, but here it was already noticeably cooler. Or maybe it was just my blood.

As I drew level with the garden at the back of the house, something came flopping over the wall at me. I hadn't been looking in that direction, or I'd have seen her: Julie, panic-stricken, her face a white mask of horror.

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She'd seemed to fly over the wall — jumped or simply bundled herself over; I couldn't say — and came hurtling into my arms. Nor had she seen me, and she fought with me a moment when I held her. Then we both caught our breath, or at least I did. Julie had a harder time of it. Even though I'd never heard her scream before, there was one building up in her, and I knew it.

I shook her, which served to shake me a little, too, then hugged her close. "What were you doing in the garden?" I asked, when she'd started to breathe again. I spoke in a whisper, and that was how she answered me, but drawing breath raggedly between each burst of words:

"The little goat . . . he was bleating . . . so pitifully . . . frightened! I heard him . . . went to see . . . got in through a gate on the other side." She paused and took a deep breath. "Oh *God*, Jim!"

I knew without asking. A picture of the slumped figure in the chair, under the olive tree, had flashed momentarily on my mind's eye. But I asked anyway: "The tarpaulin?"

She nodded, gulped. "Something had to be dead under there. I had no idea it would be a . . . a . . . a man!"

"English?" That was a stupid question, so I tried again: "I mean, did he look like a tourist, a holiday maker?"

She shook her head. "An old Greek, I think. But there are — *ugh!* — these things all over him. Like . . . like—"

"Like crabs?"

She drew back from me, her eyes wide, terror replaced by astonishment. "How did you know that?"

Quickly, I related all I knew. As I was finishing, her hand flew to her mouth. "Dimitrios? Putting their eggs in the tanks? But Jim, we've taken showers — both of us!"

"Calm down," I told her. "We had our showers *before* I saw him up there. And we haven't eaten here, or drunk any of the water."

"Eaten?" her eyes opened wider still. "But if I hadn't heard the kid bleating, I might have eaten!"

"What?"

She nodded. "I ordered wine and . . . some melon. I thought we'd have it before the fish. But the Greek girl dropped it, and—"

She was rapidly becoming incoherent. I grabbed her again, held her tightly. "Dropped it? You mean she dropped the food?"

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"She dropped the melon, yes." She nodded jerkily. "The bottle of wine, too. She came out of the kitchen and just let everything drop. It all smashed on the floor. And she stood there wringing her hands for a moment. Then she ran off. She was crying: 'Oh Dimitrios, Dimitrios!'"

"I think he's crazy," I told her. "He has to be. And his wife — or sister, or whatever she is — she's scared to death of him. You say she ran off? Which way?"

"Toward the town, the way we came. I saw her climbing the spur."

I hazarded a guess: "He's pushed her to the edge, and she's slipped over. Come on, let's go and have a look at Dimitrios's kitchen."

We went to the front of the building, to the kitchen door. There on the floor by one of the tables, I saw a broken wine bottle, its dark red contents spilled. Also a half-melon, lying in several softly jagged chunks. And in the melon, crawling in its scattered seeds and pulp red juices—

"Where are the others?" I said, wanting to speak first before Julie could cry out, trying to forestall her.

"Others?" she whispered. She hadn't really heard me, hadn't even been listening; she was concentrating on backing away from the half-dozen crawling things that moved blindly on the floor.

I stamped on them, crushed them in a frenzy of loathing, they scuffed the soles of my flip-flops on the dusty concrete floor as if I'd stepped in something nasty — which is one hell of an understatement. "The other people," I said. "The three sisters and . . . and George." I was talking more to myself than to Julie, and my voice was hoarse.

My fear transferred itself instantly. "Oh Jim, Jim!" she cried. She threw herself into my arms, shivering as if in a fever. And I felt utterly useless —no, defenseless — a sensation I'd occasionally known in deep water, without my gun, when the shadow of a rock might suddenly take on the aspect of a great, menacing fish.

Then there came one of the most dreadful sounds I've ever heard in my life: the banging and clattering of Dimitrios's three-wheeler on the road cut into the spur, echoing down to us from the rocks of the mountainside. "My spear gun," I said. "Come on, quickly!"

She followed at arm's length, half running, half dragged. "We're too vulnerable," I gasped as we reached the chalet. "Put clothes on, anything. Cover up your skin."

"What?" She was still dazed. "What?"

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"*Cover yourself!*" I snapped. Then I regained control. "Look, he tried to give us these things. He gave them to George, and to the sisters for all I know. And he may try again. Do you want one of those things on your flesh, maybe laying its eggs in you?"

She emptied a drawer onto the floor, found slacks, and pulled them on; good shoes, too, to cover her feet. I did much the same: pulled on a long-sleeved pullover, rammed my feet into decent shoes. And all in a sort of frenzied blur, fingers all thumbs, heart thumping. And: "*Oh shit!*" she sobbed. Which wasn't really my Julie at all.

"Eh?" She was heading for the small room at the back.

"Toilet!" she said. "I have to."

"*No!*" I jumped across the space between, dragged her away from the door to the toilet-*cum*-shower unit. "It's crawling with them in there. They come up the plugholes." In my arms, I could feel that she was also crawling. Her flesh. Mine, too. "If you must go, go outside. But first let's get away from here." I picked up my gun, loaded it with a single flap-nosed spear.

Leaving the chalet, I looked across at the ramp coming down from the rocky spur. The clatter of Dimitrios's three-wheeler was louder; it was there, headlight beams bobbing as the vehicle trundled lurchingly down the rough decline. "Where are we going?" Julie gasped, following me at a run across the scrub between clumps of olives. I headed for the other chalets.

"Safety in numbers," I answered. "Anyway, I want to know about George, and those three old spinsters."

"What good will they be, if they're old?" She was too logical by half.

"They're not that old." Mainly, I wanted to see if they were all right. Apart from the near-distant racket Dimitrios's vehicle was making, the whole valley was quiet as a tomb. Unnaturally quiet. It had to be a damned funny place in Greece where the cicadas keep their mouths shut.

Julie had noticed that, too. "They're not singing," she said. And I knew what she meant.

"Rubbing," I answered. "They rub their legs together or something."

"Well," she panted, "whatever it is they do, they're not."

It was true evening now, and a half-moon had come up over the central mountain's southern extreme. Its light silvered our way through thorny shrubs and tall, spiked grasses, under the low gray branches of olives and across their tangled, groping roots.

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We came to the first chalet. Its lights were out, but the door stood ajar. "I think this is where George is staying," I said. And calling ahead: "George, are you in?", I entered and switched on the light. He was in — in the big double bed, stretched out on his back. But he turned his head toward us as we entered. He blinked in the sudden, painful light. One of his eyes did, anyway. The other couldn't. . . .

He stirred himself, tried to sit up. I think he was grinning. I can't be sure, because one of the things, a big one, was inside the corner of his mouth. They were hatching from fresh lumps down his neck and in the bend of his elbow. God knows what the rest of his body was like. He managed to prop himself up, hold out a hand to me — and I almost took it. And it was then that I began to understand something of the nature of these things. For there was one of them in his open palm, its barbed feet seeming poised, waiting.

I snatched back my hand, heard Julie's gasp. And there she was, backed up against the wall, screaming her silent scream. I grabbed her, hugged her, dragged her outside. For of course there was nothing we could do for George. And, afraid she would scream, and maybe start *me* going, I slapped her. And off we went again, reeling in the direction of the third and last chalet.

Down by the taverna, Dimitrios's three-wheeler had come to a halt, its engine stilled, its beams dim, reaching like pallid hands along the sand. But I didn't think it would be long before he was on the move again. And the nightmare was expanding, growing vaster with every beat of my thundering heart.

In the third chalet . . . it's hard to describe all I saw. Maybe there's no real need. The spinster I'd thought was maybe missing something was in much the same state as George; she, too, was in bed, with those god-awful things hatching in her. Her sisters . . . at first I thought they were both dead, and. . . . But there, I've gone ahead of myself. That's how it always happens when I think about it, try to reconstruct it again in my own mind: it speeds up until I've outstripped myself. You have to understand that the whole thing was kaleidoscopic.

I went inside ahead of Julie, got a quick glimpse, an indistinct picture of the state of things fixed in my brain — then turned and kept Julie from coming in. "Watch for him." I forced the words around my bobbing Adam's apple and returned to take another look. I didn't want to, but I thought the

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more we knew about this monster, the better we'd know how to deal with him. Except that in a little while, I guessed there would be only one possible way to deal with him.

The sister in the bed moved and lolled her head a little; I was wary, suspicious of her, and left her strictly alone. The other two had been attacked. With an ax or a machete or something. One of them lay behind the door, the other on the floor on the near side of the bed. The one behind the door had been sliced twice, deeply, across the neck and chest and lay in a pool of her own blood, which was already congealing. Tick-things, coming from the bathroom, had got themselves stuck in the darkening pool, their barbed legs twitching when they tried to extricate themselves. The other sister. . . .

Senses swimming, throat bobbing, I stepped closer to the bed with its grimacing, hag-ridden occupant, and I bent over the one on the floor. She was still alive, barely. Her green dress was a sodden red under the rib cage, torn open in a jagged flap to reveal her gaping wound. And Dimitrios had dropped several of his damned pets onto her, which were burrowing in the raw, dark flesh.

She saw me through eyes already filming over, whispered something. I got down on one knee beside her, wanted to hold her hand, stroke her hair, do something. But I couldn't. I didn't want those bloody things on me. "It's all right," I said. "It's all right." But we both knew it wasn't.

"The . . . the Greek," she said, her voice so small I could scarcely hear it.

"I know, I know," I told her.

"We wanted to . . . to take Flo into town. She was . . . was so *ill!* He said to wait here. We waited, and . . . and. . . ." She gave a deep sigh. Her eyes rolled up, and her mouth fell open.

Something touched my shoulder where I knelt, and I leapt erect, flesh tingling. The one on the bed, Flo, had flopped an arm in my direction — deliberately ! Her hand had touched me. Crawling slowly down her arm, a trio of the nightmare ticks or crabs had been making for me. They'd been homing in on me like a bee targeting a flower. But more slowly, thank God, far more slowly.

Horror froze me rigid; but in the moment, Julie's sobbing cry — "Jim, he's coming!" — unfroze me at once.

I staggered outside. A dim, slender, dark and reeling shape was making its way along the rough track between the chalets. Something glinted

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dully in his hand. Terror galvanized me. "Head for the high ground," I said. I took Julie's hand, began to run.

"High ground?" she panted. "Why?" She was holding together pretty well. I thanked God I hadn't let her see inside the chalet.

"Because then we'll have the advantage. He'll have to come up at us. Maybe I can roll rocks down on him or something."

"You have your gun," she said.

"As a last resort," I told her, "yes. But this isn't a John Wayne Western, Julie. This is real! Shooting a man isn't the same as shooting a fish. . . ." And we scrambled across the rough scrubland toward the goat track up the far spur. Maybe ten minutes later and halfway up that track, suddenly it dawned on both of us just where we were heading. Julie dug in her heels and dragged me to a halt.

"But the cave's up there!" she panted. "The well!"

I looked all about. The light was difficult, made everything seem vague and unreal. Dusk is the same the world over: it confuses shapes, distances, colors and textures. On our right, scree rising steeply all the way to the plateau: too dangerous by far. And on our left a steep, in places sheer, decline to the valley's floor. All you had to do was stumble once, and you wouldn't stop sliding and tumbling and bouncing till you hit the bottom. Up ahead the track was moon-silvered, to the place where the cliff overhung, where the shadows were black and blacker than night. And behind . . . behind us came Dimitrios, his presence made clear by the sound his boots made shoving rocks and pebbles out of his way.

"Come on," I said, starting on up again.

"But where to?" Hysteria was in her whisper.

"That clump of rocks there." Ahead, on the right, weathered out of the scree, a row of long boulders like leaning graveyard slabs tilted at the moon. I got between two of them, pulled Julie off the track, and jammed her behind me. It was last-ditch stuff; there was no way out other than the way we'd come in. I loaded my gun, hauling on the propulsive rubbers until the spear was engaged. And then there was nothing else to do but wait.

"Now be quiet," I hissed, crouching down. "He may not see us, go straight on by."

Across the little valley, headlights blazed. Then came the echoing roar of revving engines. A moment more, and I could identify humped sil-

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houettes making their way like beetles down the ridge of the far spur toward the indigo sea, then slicing the gloom with scythes of light as they turned onto the dirt ramp. Two cars and a motorcycle. Down on the valley's floor, they raced for the taverna.

Dimitrios came struggling out of the dusk, up out of the darkness, his breathing loud, labored, gasping as he climbed in our tracks. His silhouette where he paused for breath was scarecrow-lean, and he'd lost his floppy, wide-brimmed hat. But I suspected a strength in him that wasn't entirely his own. From where she peered over my shoulder Julie had spotted him, too. I heard her sharp intake of breath, breathed, "*Shh!*" so faintly I wasn't even sure she'd hear me.

He came on, the thin moonlight turning his eyes yellow, and turning his machete silver. Level with the boulders he drew, and almost level with our hiding place, and paused again. He looked this way and that, cocked his head, and listened. Behind me, Julie was trembling. She trembled so hard I was sure it was coming right through me, through the rocks, too, and the earth, and right through the soles of his boots to Dimitrios.

He took another two paces up the track, came level with us. Now he stood out against the sea and the sky, where the first pale stars were beginning to switch themselves on. He stood there, looking up the slope toward the cave under the cliff, and small, dark silhouettes were falling from the large blot ot his head. Not droplets of sweat, no, for they were far too big, and too brittle-sounding where they landed on the loose scree.

Again Julie snatched a breath, and Dimitrios's head slowly came round until he seemed to be staring right at us.

Down in the valley the cars and the motorcycle were on the move again, engines revving, headlight beams slashing here and there. There was some shouting. Lights began to blaze in the taverna, the chalets. Flashlights cut narrow searchlight swaths in the darkness.

Dimitrios seemed oblivious to all this; still looking in our direction, he scratched at himself under his right armpit. His action rapidly became frantic, until with a soft, gurgling cry, he tore open his shirt. He let his machete fall clatteringly to the track and clawed wildly at himself with both hands! He was shedding tick-things as a dog sheds fleas. He tore open his trousers, dropped them, staggered as he stepped out of them. Agonized sulfur eyes burned yellow in his blot of a face as he tore at his thighs.

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I saw all of this, every slightest action. And so did Julie. I felt her swell up behind me, scooping in air until she must surely burst — and then she let it out again. But silently, screaming like a maniac in the night — and nothing but air escaping her!

A rock slid away from under my foot, its scrape a deafening clatter to my petrified mind. The sound froze Dimitrios, too — but only for a moment. Then he stooped, regained his machete. He took a pace toward us, inclined his head. He couldn't see us yet, but he knew we were there. Then — *God*, I shall dream of this for the rest of my life! —

He reached down a hand and stripped a handful of living, crawling filth from his loins, and lobbed it in our direction as casually as tossing crumbs to starveling birds!

The next five seconds were madness.

I stumbled out from cover, lifted my gun, and triggered it. The spear struck him just below the rib cage, went deep into him. He cried out, reeled back, and yanked the gun from my hand. I'd forgotten to unfasten the nylon cord from the spear. Behind me, Julie was crumpling to the ground; I was aware of the latter, turned to grab her before she could sprawl. There were tick-things crawling about, and I mustn't let her fall on them.

I got her over my shoulder in a fireman's lift, went charging out onto the track, skipping and stamping my feet, roaring like a maddened bull. And I was mad: mad with shock, terror, loathing. I stamped and kicked and danced, never letting my feet stay in one place for more than a fraction of a second, afraid something would climb up onto me. And the wonder is I didn't carry both of us flying down the steep scree slope to the valley's floor.

Dimitrios was halfway down the track when finally I got myself under a semblance of control. Bouncing toward our end of the valley, a car came crunching and lurching across the scrub. I fancied it was Nichos's taxi. And sure enough, when the car stopped and its headlight beams were still, Nichos's voice came echoing up, full of concerned inquiry:

"Mister, lady — you O.K.?"

"Look out!" I shouted at the top of my voice, but only at the second attempt. "He's coming down! Dimitrios is coming down!"

And now I went more carefully, as in my mind the danger receded, and in my veins the adrenaline raced less rapidly. Julie moaned where she flopped loosely across my shoulder, and I knew she'd be all right.

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The valley seemed alight with torches now, and not only the electric sort. Considering these people were Greeks, they seemed remarkably well organized. That was a thought I'd keep in mind, something else I would have to ask about. There was some shouting down there, too, and flaring torches began to converge on the area at the foot of the goat track.

Then there echoed up to me a weird, gurgled cry: a cry of fear, protestation — relief? A haunting, sobbing shriek — cut off at highest pitch by the dull boom of a shot fired, and a moment later by a blast that was the twin of the first. From twin barrels, no doubt.

When I got down, Julie was still out of it, for which I was glad. They'd poured gasoline over Dimitrios's body and set fire to it. Fires were burning everywhere: the chalets, taverna, gardens. Cleansing flames leaping. Figures moved in the smoke and against a yellow roaring background, searching, burning. And I sat in the back of Nichos's taxi, cradling Julie's head. Mercifully, she remained unconscious right through it.

Even with the windows rolled up, I could smell something of the smoke, and something that wasn't smoke. . . .

IN MAKELOS town, Julie began to stir; I asked for her to be sedated, kept down for the night. Then, when she was sleeping soundly and safely in a room at the mayor's house, I began asking questions. I was furious at the beginning, growing more furious as I started to get the answers.

I couldn't be sorry for the people of Makelos, though I did feel something for Elli, Dimitrios's wife. She'd run to Nichos, told him what was happening. And he'd alerted the townspeople. Elli had been a sort of prisoner at the taverna for the past ten days or so, after her husband had "gone funny." Then, when she'd started to notice things, he'd told her to keep quiet and carry on as normal, or she'd be the loser. And he meant she'd lose all the way. She reckoned he'd got the parasites off the goats, accidentally, and she was probably right, for the goats had been the first to die. Her explanation was likely because the goats used to go up there sometimes, to the cave under the mountain. And that was where the things bred, in that cave and in the well it contained, which now and then overflowed, and found its way to the sea.

But Elli, poor peasant that she was, on her way to alert Nichos, she'd seen her husband kill George's wife and push her over the cliffs into the

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sea. Then she'd hid herself off the road until he'd turned his three-wheeler round and started back toward the taverna.

As for the corpse under the tarpaulin: that was Dimitrios's grandfather, who along with his grandson had been a survivor of the first outbreak. He'd been lucky that time, not so lucky this time.

And the tick-things? They were . . . a *disease*, but they could never be a plague. The men from Athens had taken some of them away with them that first time. But away from their well, away from the little shaded valley and from Makelos, they'd quickly died. This was their place, and they could exist nowhere else. Thank God!

Last time the chemicals hadn't killed them off, obviously, or maybe a handful of eggs had survived to hatch out when the poisons had dissolved away. For they *were* survivors, these creatures, the last of their species, and when they went, their secret would go with them. But a disease? I believe so, yes.

Like the common cold, or rabies, or any other disease, but far worse because they're visible, apparent. The common cold makes you sneeze, so that the disease is propagated, and hydrophobia makes it victims claw and bite, gets passed on in their saliva. The secret of the tick-things was much the same sort of thing: they made their hosts pass them on. It was the way their intelligent human hosts did it that made them so much more terrible.

In the last outbreak, only Greeks — Makelosians — had been involved; this time it was different. This time, too, the people would take care of the problem themselves: they'd pour hundreds of gallons of gasoline and fuel oil into the well, set the place on fire. And then they'd dynamite the cliff, bring it down to choke the well forever; and they'd never, *ever*, let people go into that little valley again. That was their promise, but I'd made myself a couple of promises, too. I was angry and frightened, and I knew I was going to stay that way for a long time to come.

We were out of there first thing in the morning, on the first boat to the mainland. There were smart-looking men to meet us at the airport in Athens, Greek officials from some ministry or other. They had interpreters with them, and nothing was too much trouble. They, too, made promises, offers of compensation, anything our hearts desired. We nodded and smiled wearily, said yes to this, that, and the other, anything so that we could just get aboard that plane. It had been our shortest holiday ever:

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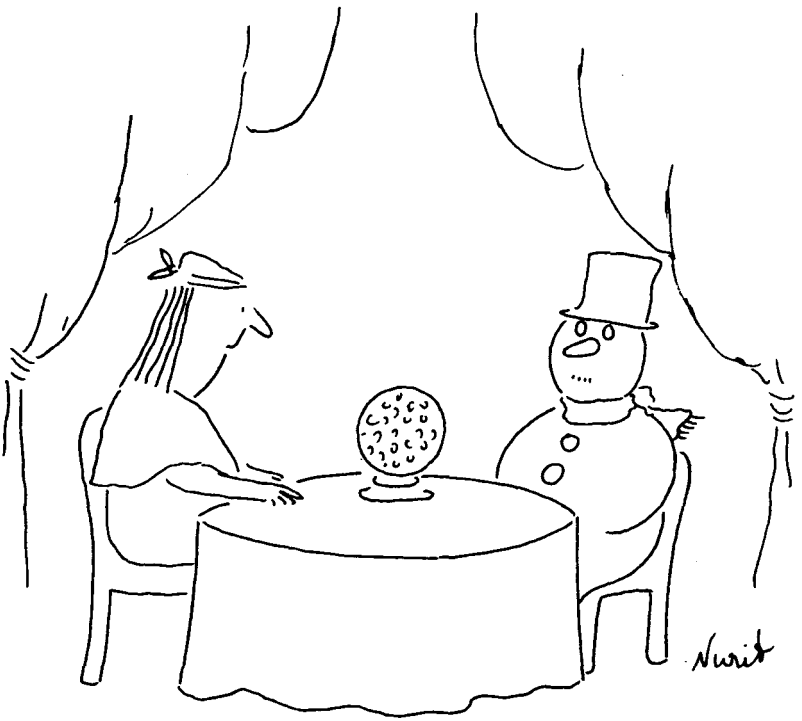
we'd been in Greece just forty-eight hours, and all we wanted now was to be out of it as quickly as possible. But when we were back home again — *that* was when we told our story!

It was played down, of course: the Common Market, international tensions, a thousand other economic and diplomatic reasons. Which is why I'm now telling it all over again. I don't want anybody to suffer what we went through, what we're still going through. And so if you happen to be mad on the Mediterranean islands . . . well, I'm sorry, but that's the way it was.

As for Julie and me: we've moved away from the sea, and come summer, we won't be going out in the sun too much or for too long. That helps a little. But every now and then, I'll wake up in the night, in a cold sweat, and find Julie doing her horrible thing: nightmaring about Dimitrios, hiding from him, holding her breath so that he won't hear her —

— And sometimes screaming her silent screams. . . .



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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Swordspoint, Ellen Kushner, Arbor House, $15.95

On Stranger Tides, Tim Powers, Ace hardcover, $16.95

ELLEN KUSHNER is tallish, slim, brunette, and has the face of an attractively bookish schoolgirl. I burden you, and her, with this characterization because once again it just goes to show you that people have universes inside them and some — a fortunate few — can reach them, descry them, and bring them out to where you and I can share some portion of them. And they could be walking by you anytime.

Ellen Kushner, in the trite, inexact, and yet accurate phrase, can write like an angel. How does an angel write? An angel writes in such a way that, beyond all the particular virtues in any given particular work from that angel, there is a clear sense that this is just one work; that many others are waiting and can be reliably expected to appear in due course. An angel does not necessarily write any particular work as if nothing like it need ever be attempted again . . . but there is this sense that on any give occasion, she could.

Which does not guarantee that you will unfailingly like *Swordspoint*. But I feel reasonably certain if you like the kind of book *Swordspoint* is, you are apt to consider it an outstanding example of its kind.

What kind is it? Well, that depends on what about a book is what characterizes it for you. For me, the crucial thing in answering that kind of question is not whether it's science fiction as distinguished from fantasy, and then what sort of one of those kinds; the important thing for me is the tone.

Tone is an elusive sort of thing. But you know it when you point to it. The blurb copy that went out with the *Swordspoint* review galleys evokes comparisons to M. John Harrison's *The Pastel City*, *Gloriana* by Michael Moorcock, and John M. Ford's *The Dragon Waiting*. As usual in blurb copy prepared by David Hartwell, this makes sense.

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But I'm mostly minded of Gene Wolfe's Book of The New Sun milieu, particularly as conveyed in *The Shadow of The Torturer*, despite the fact that Kushner's book is not clearly set on a far-future Earth, and therefore isn't science fiction even by elastic standards.

Since there isn't any magic in it, it's also not of the fantasy kind. But it certainly is SF, in the crucial way that is common to all the other books named above; the people in it move in a fully realized society that never was, that cannot readily be extrapolated into some documentable future, and yet which is clearly attainable by humans. Like all of the other masters named above, Kushner is working directly with *SF*, not with "s" or "f", and only the Speculative Fiction category-label is sufficiently acute to explain what about it is peculiarly suited to our sort of reading.

But that doesn't finish explaining what I mean by tone. *Swordspoint* is set in a nameless city we all know, with the nobles on the Hill in mansions of stone and wood whose appearance is fully textured in our minds, and, on the other side of the oily, slow-moving river, the chock-a-block warrens, twisty little streets and unexpected intersections where the denizens of that criminal slum den-up in their rookeries and melodramatize in their sinister taverns.

This is a place that needs no great detail of description; we have been in it all our lives. Where action requires it, Kushner provides elegantly picked-out data; nobles on the river at night in their barges to enjoy the firework display while dining; the dresses of the Duchess Tremontaine, and her sidelong glances; the *salle d'armes* of Applethorpe, the master swordsman barred forever from the direct practice of his profession by the loss of his arm, and the great municipal chamber where Richard St Vier goes on trial not for killing and dismembering a Lord, but for whether or not he at the time was acting for a client.

It is a place where blood flows freely and is not treated with repugnance; merely dealt with as evidence, and frequently as evidence of socially approved action taken correctly. Somewhere in the past of this city, and of the culture in which that city can occur, the nobles went over from personal duelling to the hiring of mercenary swordsmen to do it for them. In the time we now have unfolded for us, Richard St Vier is the premier sword.

As one can certainly expect of this sort of Nobility, the line is sometimes blurred between a genuine duel and a political action.

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St Vier, slim, graceful, unlettered, of coarse background but superlative skill, intuitively grasps that only rigid adherance to a personal code of ethics will preserve him whole in his own estimation. But the appearance in Riverside of the scholarly, short tempered and arrogant Alec signals the end of St Vier's ability to care for himself simply through endless attention to details of behavior. St Vier and Alec become lovers. Thereafter, periodic demonstration-killings are required to protect Alec from the results of his high-handed, quarrelsome manner toward the slum *polloi*. But that is not, as I think you will be able to foretell, all there is to Alec, or to the entanglement of St Vier's life.

Kushner has subtitled this book "A Melodrama of Manners," and that it is. But to it she has brought not only an ability to plot a scenario but to write it in a pellucid, poetically structured prose — in which the deliberate use of English spellings is a working piece of technique as distinguished from an ornamentation — and to convey a gathering sense of the tragic reality which the text events of *Swordspoint* allegorize. I have not in some time read a better writer.

Who has stepped forward here among us is, as hitherto defined, an angel. *Swordspoint* is completed among her works, present and future; her sword, however, clearly remains unsheathed.

Tim Powers's first hardcover book is not like any previous Tim Powers novel I know of. It's not much like any story recently told in SF.

It begins with a quotation from the obscure but increasingly appreciated William Ashbless: ". . . And unmoored souls may drift on stranger tides/Than those men know of,/and be overthrown/By winds that would not even stir a hair. . . ."*

But this is not otherwise a book much like *The Anubis Gates* or *Dinner at Deviant's Palace*, which brought Powers two Philip K. Dick Awards for the best American original paperback of the year. It is a book of Caribbean pirate adventure — a rip-roaring, muzzle-loading sea story right out of the pages of classic pulp adventure . . . superimposed, of course, on the premise that Voodoo really works, and that the Fountain of Youth can be found — if one cares to undertake the ensorceled journey to that grisly place, and pay the ghastly price.

Powers's milieu reeks with au-

* *The scansion imposed here is mine, and serves only for this excerpt. In the original passage taken as a whole, the meter runs differently.*

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thenticity. His story does not require the depth of historical and ship-handling detail that's found in the Lord Hornblower books of C. S. Forester, but there's every sense that it could have been provided. The cordage creaks, the timbers groan, and the wind and the ocean are ceaseless presences in the appropriate scenes. A similar reality pervades every other setting required by the deployment of this tale of necromantic rivalries and repugnant rites of sacrifice. And there's not a character too much or too few: Ann Bonney and Blackbeard appear as real individuals, and do real work, within a cast which also includes, captivatingly, a sinister physician, a fatefully obsessed Natural Philosopher, his knockout of a maiden daughter, and a straitlaced, reserved young man whom events transform into a cutlass-swinging, pistoleering captain of pirate crews living and dead.

It would have been easy to let these various elements get out of control and wreck each other's effects. But Powers, for all the twinkle in his eye when he sits at his beer, weaves all sorts of artful things behind his face, and we are the beneficiaries of his art. You cannot tell a book by its cover. Or, rather, you can, but only if you have read a lot of other books.

* * *

And now, because there's space to do it:

You don't often get your reading of my column cluttered up with responses from me aimed at someone else's reading of some previous column. Life's too short, and that's a complicated sentence. However, a fellow who wanted to say something nice about me has caused my lower jaw to drop, and then I went on to realize that there might be usefulness in discussing the matter a bit, as follows:

In the March, 1987 *North American Review*, there's a review of four titles in Southern Illinois University's "Alternatives" series of books on SF. One of them is my *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys*, and it is discussed, quite favorably, by Thomas J. Remington. Remington is a person I've never heard of, because I deliberately chose, years ago, not to get into the world of magazines whose titles tend to include the word Review. However, he writes a literate paragraph, appears to think pretty clearly, and does speak of SF with a certain air of familiarity. He's not totally up to snuff, confusing "hard-core science fiction," a Ballantine Books marketing epithet, with "hard-science fiction," an identification made by James Blish in a critical essay. And therefore his en-

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tire criticsm of a Rabkin and Slusser book, *Hard Science Fiction*, is off the point, even though he does bring me in to support his position.

I forgive him for the fuzzy terminology, though I hope he now corrects it in his own mind. I do not much forgive him for using me inappropriately in an attack on George Slusser and Eric Rabkin, who deserve only exact opposition. What most bothers me is that, in the midst of finding all the virtues in *Benchmarks*,* Remington says: "Emphatically, I often don't agree with Budrys's sometimes boorish pronouncements (e.g., "A story by J. G. Ballard, as you know, calls for people who don't think"). . . ."

Boorish? Substitute any common term of opprobrium, and it's O.K. with me. "Budrys's invariably s--t-headed pronouncements," for instance, or "unfailingly opaque" pronouncements. I mean, I may from time to time be wrong in my logic, and I may from time to time couch my opinions in prose structures so weird as to conceal all intended meaning. But *boorish*?

Is it, then, to be a matter of courtesy, and not a proposing of fact? Are we to read not only the text of the work but remain aware of some sort of Social Register as well? The quote in question comes from a *Galaxy* review, now the better part of two decades old, of Thomas M. Disch's *The Genocides*, oddly enough, not of Ballard's *The Wind From Nowhere*. Both are novels apparently intended to prove that Man is vulnerable to caprices of the Universe, but which deliberately people their casts with characters who are too stupid to come in out of the rain.

This reduces the entire thing to an exercise in poking at the caged animals through the bars and guffawing at their discomfiture. That is a literary failure and lousy drama, an inadequate test of the proposition, and, in short, a cheap shot. My assertion argues that at the time Mr. Ballard and Mr. Disch, who enjoyed then and still enjoy reputations for uncommon sensitivity to the human condition, were, instead, japesters. (This continues to be my opinion of those particular works *per se* and as evidence of the orientations of their authors at that time.)

That observation may not be pleasant to the friends of the gentlemen in question, and I know Tom Disch for one still has it stuck in his craw. But my making the original point was boorish? You mean

** It had many, and you'll be glad to know the forthcoming sequel includes reprints of my earliest F&SF columns. There is also an Ed Ferman introduction that is much too kind.*

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there are some people whose work is to be approached on one's knees? O.K., in the old truck-salesman's phrasing, Show me whose ass to kiss and I'll kiss it, but isn't there some danger that if I do that, the readers of this column are being asked to do it too?

I would just as soon have the Remingtons of this world spare me their praises, if that is the order of their priorities in the arts and the measure of their acumen.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Urth of the New Sun, Gene Wolfe (Tor, cloth, 384pp, $17.95)

SEVERIAN HAS been autarch of all Urth — a tale recounted in Wolfe's brilliant four-volume epic *The Book of the New Sun*. Now he has gone into space to try to bring the New Sun to replace the dying sun of Urth. To accomplish this, he must pass a terrible test, in which he is judged by those who have most reason to hate him. And if he succeeds, then in the process of saving Urth by giving it a new star, he will cause such terrible floods and devastation that civilization will be destroyed.

It is a cruel choice to make — but Severian was born to make it, and in this book, Wolfe takes him to the edge of divinity. Along the way, Wolfe shows us wonders in the best tradition of science fiction:

The ship Severian rides on, which passes in and out of time on voyages between stars, masts protruding in all directions, and a labyrinth of passages and holds below. On deck, people wear necklaces that hold an atmosphere around them; a wonderful sense of freedom, the opposite of the usual tin-can claustrophobic images of space travel. Wolfe makes the old miracles of starflight seem new again — weightlessness, reentry, hyperspace, all under other names, are captured and revivified as if no one had ever used such devices before.

The ship is ruled by a demigod, and a civil war rages between the crew and "apports," animals and peoples who are somehow sucked into the ship from other worlds. One of these is Zak, a chameleon

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creature who becomes physically whatever its most dangerous predator is — in Zak's case, man. We meet a woman of a race that speaks by silencing all unwanted ambient sounds, literally cutting away all noises that are not part of their message. And in the process of the story we have the stuff of high romance: unmasking, transformation, shape-changing, self-meeting, crossing of water, the journey to the land of the dead, the visit to paradise — every archetype that feels inevitable and important to human beings is made real in this book.

Above all these, though, is the wonder of Wolfe's deep understanding of the complex motivations of human souls, and his unflinching search for God: the Increate, who loves and needs man, whose purpose draws but does not drive us — a God to be searched for, to be emulated, and, having been found, well worth the search. Not, in fact, omnipotent, but all-loving, which gives him all the power that *can* be had. And the universe of this book is a cycle of universes, each with its own Conciliator, its own New Sun, each giving birth to the one after. I find myself believing in these people, in their God, in that cycle of universes; to me, Wolfe's words verge on scripture. Like a fifth testament, this book can be read as Christian allegory; but it never preaches. It can be admired as art; you can love the people and watch, rapt, as the romance of the plain tale unfolds.

If there is a flaw in this book, it is the contradiction all Wolfe's work has: his details are so apt, his scenes so rich and complete, that in his intense focus on the moment it is easy to lose the overall thread of the story. I find myself immersed in the now of the book, but often confused about the connection between now and all other moments in the book. Yet I don't know how it would be possible to maintain that thread without sacrificing some of the richness of its reality. So I suggest that to read this book, you simply place yourself in Wolfe's hands and trust him to lead you to a fitting end, even if you are occasionally lost along the way.

If you have not read *The Book of the New Sun*, I believe *The Urth of the New Sun* will still be satisfying. If you have read the earlier work, you will find this sequel astonishing as it transforms and fulfills the earlier books. Few writers dare to attempt a Great Work; Wolfe attempts it and succeeds.

Great Sky River, Gregory Benford (Bantam Spectra, cloth, 336 pp, $17.95)

It's one of the most powerful tradi-

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tions in science fiction: the story of the human colonists on a faraway planet who, after countless generations, are now trapped on a hostile world without hope of escape. But, as we might expect, Gregory Benford takes the traditional story and makes it fresh and real.

As humans moved toward the galactic core, they ran into the Mechs, self-replicating and highly adaptive intelligent machines. They are transforming the planet Snowglade into their kind of world — a cold, dry desert. For a long time, human kinship groups survived in Citadels — Rook, King, Knight, Bishop, Pawn. But in the Calamity, they were driven out, the Citadel was destroyed, and now the Mantis, a dangerous and aggressive new Mech, is hunting them down.

Benford knows that in long warfare, enemies come to resemble each other more and more. It is certainly true here: humans have juiced themselves up with so many electronic parts that they feel almost helpless when they are forced to work without them. They even use electronics to preserve their lives — memories and personality are pulled out of dying men and women and then placed in the brains of their living kin, where as "aspects" they continue to be part of the life of the community. This is only the beginning of Benford's rich invention; the society, the tools, the characters in this story are exactly right.

So instead of being disappointed that the story ends as such stories always end, I was delighted; the book is so good that we can even overlook Benford's sophomoric use of silly sex as a climactic moment late in the book. Less easy to forgive is his use of the cliche that it's our sense of humor that makes us human, that keeps the inorganic Mechs from fully understanding us. Please, that was old in the 1950s, and it was dumb the first time it was used; someone as intelligent as Benford could surely discover something deeper and truer than that to distinguish between humans and machine intelligence.

But never mind; you only have to grit your teeth a couple of times, and the rest of the book is so good you'll probably end up putting *Great Sky River* on your Hugo Award nominating ballot anyway. I know I will. This is the perfect marriage of hard-sf and space opera; may a hundred other sf writers read this book and see how it's done.

When the Changewinds Blow, Jack L. Chalker (Ace, paper, 293 pp, $3.50)

From some of my friends with rather literary tastes I kept hearing Jack Chalker's name invoked as the epitome of the hack sci-fi writer, the

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guy who can churn out four or five mindless novels a year. The most vehement of them declared Chalker to be an irredeemably bad stylist, the kind of writer who makes Edgar Rice Burroughs look like William Faulkner.

But when I talked to Chalker, I heard him talk about stories he tells with the kind of intensity and integrity that I have come to recognize as the root of all powerful storytelling. Judging from his intentions, at least, Chalker is as serious about his art as any of the writers who get a lot more literary respect. And I knew many sf readers who thought of Chalker as the second coming of Heinlein.

I had never read any of Chalker's work. Now I have.

The first sentence was grammatically wrong. Not slightly wrong, but flamingly wrong. As a former copy editor, I find that kind of thing intolerable. On the first page, the awkwardness of style had me cringing enough to work up a sweat. I almost closed the book, figuring that Chalker's critics are right.

But I kept reading. And kept reading. And discovered that, while the language problems never completely went away, I soon stopped caring about them. Because Chalker knows how to tell a story.

Charley Sharkin and her best friend Sam — both girls with boys' names — are fairly normal suburban high school kids, till Sam finds herself caught in a war on another world, where she has an analogue who wants her dead. An "ally" whose own motives are rather dubious helps them by disguising them as each other — which makes Charley rather uncertain about things, since it makes her the prime target.

Along with a swashbuckling adventure plot, Chalker gives us some deeply disturbing variations on one of the most basic of archetypes — disguise and transformation. I have been told it is a frequent event in a Chalker novel to have a character change sexes, but since I've only read the one book of his, it certainly was not a cliche to me. Furthermore, Chalker, a man who (like me) knows the pain of a constant war with adiposity, took the personally daring step of having one of his characters, in true lotus-eater style, become contentedly and obnoxiously fat. Chalker deals truthfully with self-loathing and the search for purpose and identity. And yet he never forgets the reader's hunger for a story that is clear and important and true. In short, the deep themes of good art are there, but without sacrificing the plain tale that allows unsophisticated readers to live in the author's world.

On the basis of one book, I can't

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tell you whether Chalker is a great writer or not. I *can* tell you that he's a damn fine storyteller, and *When the Changewinds Blow* is a good start on what promises to be an enjoyable and important work of fantasy. Chalker still needs to let a copy editor make some suggestions, and then follow a few of them — it would only make his work better, just as good copy editors help me and every other writer I know. But the awkwardness of language is only skin deep; when it comes to the tale itself, Chalker is a master.

BOOK RECEIVED

Strokes; Essays and Reviews 1966-1986, John Clute, Serconia Press (PO Box 1786, Seattle, WA 98111), $16.95 hardcover, $8.95 paperback. A collection of critical writings from this magazine, *New Worlds* and others. Introduction by Thomas M. Disch.

CLARION WEST ANNOUNCES 1988 WRITERS' WORKSHOP

The fifth annual Clarion West science fiction and fantasy writing workshop will be held from 19 June - 31 July 1988 at Seattle Central Community college, with writers-in-residence: **Orson Scott Card, Elizabeth Lynn, Greg Bear, Joan Vinge, Gardner Dozois,** and **Peter S. Beagle.**

Applications are now being accepted. Approximately 20 students will be selected from the applicants. Tuition until 1 March 1988 is $925. Late applications will be considered until 15 April 1988, at a cost of $975. College credit and dormitory lodging are available, but are not covered by tuition. Limited scholarships are available.

To apply, submit 20 - 30 pages of manuscript (1 or 2 short stories or a novel excerpt with outline) with a cover letter describing your background and reasons for wanting to attend Clarion West, and a $50 refundable deposit payable to Clarion West. Send to: Clarion West, 340 15th Avenue East, Suite 350, Seattle, WA 98112.

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Harvey Jacobs is a writer of keen wit, and in "The Toll Bridge" he turns his attention — and humor — to Maxfield Shnibitz, a psychiatrist who is suffering from temporary burn-out. This is a tale of an analyst, a patient and a cure that cuts . . . to the heart of the matter.

The Toll Bridge

By Harvey Jacobs

DR. MAXFIELD SHNIBITZ was no slave to a single discipline. He described his work as eclectic. He refused to be classified as a Freudian, Jungian, or Reichian — or any *ian*. He once told a seminar on *Directions in Psychiatry: The New Age*: "The modern analyst must be a bridge between the secular and spiritual worlds, albeit a toll bridge." Dr. Shnibitz — a stocky man with a large, round head bald at the top; a bush of a mustache; sideburns that flared; and a compassionate face — then leaned intimately toward his audience and said, "And while the tolls may be generous, they take a toll." Dealing with the anguished, the off-center, even the mildly troubled was exhausting, and Dr. Shnibitz did not feel overpaid.

His reward was not all monetary, of course. Occasionally he helped a patient achieve a "breakthrough," and he played midwife to the birth of a restructured soul. He had been catalyst for amazing change, and those patients who were fortunate enough to shed burdens of fuzzy guilt for

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a fresh, positive outlook were obviously grateful. Sometimes they gave him presents.

Such was the case with a man who came in a basket case and climbed successfully from his basket after years of turmoil. During his final session he handed Dr. Shnibitz an amulet on a gold chain. "I actually bought this thing from a psychic in Albania," the cured man said. "That's a measure of how bad off I was. She told me it was a power symbol that once belonged to a werewolf or some damn thing that went broke and pawned it. That was before the country went Commie. She's probably the minister of culture now." Dr. Shnibitz accepted the gift without commenting on the symbolic overtones. The redeemed patient was handing his doctor something he himself had redeemed, an amulet that linked him to magic, the uncontrolled, a kingdom of shadows, the dark forces of madness, no longer a threat. He was handing his bit of ersatz power to the man powerful enough to overcome those demons. Dr. Shnibitz just smiled from his ample face and shook hands with his departing patient. It was the first time they had ever touched physically, and it satisfied the psychiatrist that the hand he gripped was dry, the handshake firm and confident.

The amulet was put in a desk drawer. That night, after finishing with his caseload, Dr. Shnibitz was filled with a strange curiosity about the object. He took it out of the drawer and laid it on his desk. It was shaped like a pyramid and made from some amalgam of stone, metal, and bone. His fingers brushed over it; there was a porous quality, slightly gritty, like stroking a dry sponge. God knows what it was made of or when or why. A friend of Dr. Shnibitz brought back an amulet from Africa formed of rag and wood chips that turned out to be home to a devilish larva. Worms infested the poor man's apartment. They had to be bombed by exterminators using chemicals that made the place smell like a toxic dump. The amulet on Dr. Shnibitz's desk did not seem like it would harbor anything organic. It felt cold, lifeless. He decided it was no hive or nest.

Besides, the patient had worn it for years. Curiously, it was never mentioned during their hundreds of sessions. Had it been, the timetable of discovery and recovery might have been quickened. Treasured objects often mirror the most secret images. They can be valuable shortcuts to the core of infection. Perhaps that is why they are so defended. Dr. Shnibitz was hurt that his patient had never spoken of the amulet, and he laughed alone in his office to find himself reacting like a child. It was, as

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they say, "water under the bridge."

More interesting was the fact that the patient had actually purchased such a talisman. The man ran a successful business, was married, had children. For all his problem he was a creature of this scientific century. Yet he paid American dollars for something he knew to be worthless. Maybe that was the motivation, a shared sense of worthlessness. Or was it simple, old-fashioned desperation? What had Nixon's daughter said to the press? "Never underestimate the power of fear." Well, the patient was no longer a patient, no longer troubled, a closed file.

Dr. Shnibitz wished he could say the same about himself. In recent months he had felt a growing dissatisfaction with his own life. He found himself angry at patients who complained of things that were no more than the ordinary viruses of life. He was bored by transparent dreams and frustrated ambitions that were never worth the achieving. Dr. Shnibitz suspected his own burnout. He needed a vacation, a change, but he could think of no place he wanted to go, nothing he wanted to see.

Stroking the amulet, his mind wandered to exotic places on the globe — Marrakesh, Tahiti, the isles of Greece, Kyoto — and rejected them one by one. No, it was not a vacation he needed. It was some kind of challenge. He knew that the patient who would replace the patient who left would come trembling with doubt, armed against ghosts that would prove to be made from curds of milk from some denying tit; that he would have to listen to hours and hours of the same old crap, the moaning and groaning, the evasions and denials, and, finally, with luck, confrontation and rejoicing. Another triumph, another little gift, and on and on and on. The truth about people is that they are often duller than dishwater . . . dishwater is a complex swirl about to confront the ultimate drain. Most neurotics confront nothing more than their own borders. Perspective sets them free. They leave satisfied with their limitations. They find strength in the acceptance of weakness. And often they grow arrogant with their new identity as blades of grass, not towering trees, on the human landscape. With that knowledge they go on to intimidate other neurotics, and so on and on and on.

Dr. Shnibitz let out a long, loud sigh. He remembered the case of a secretary who was terrified when she thought of all the papers she would type over a lifetime. She saw them as an Everest of papers. She had been saved with the insight that she would type the pages one at a time. That

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was enough to liberate her from nightmares. Actually, it should have caused worse nightmares for the poor woman. But she became a more efficient secretary, eventually an office manager, then a vice president, and she still sent a card every Christmas. She also referred patients. *Sic transit.*

A challenge, enormous challenge, combat. Maybe that would open arteries clogged with predictability and send a rush of blood to the large eggplant brain under Dr. Shnibitz's bald pate. The doctor found himself tapping at his skull. He also found himself sucking the amulet like a lollipop. Sometime during his meditations he had unconsciously put the trinket into his mouth. It was his first unconscious gesture in years. He marveled while he tongued the weird thing, the gold chain dangling from his lips like dribble, and he thought, "Maybe it is time for the travel folders."

There was a loud noise in Dr. Shnibitz's reception room. He jumped. His own secretary had left early to make a theater curtain. There were no arrivals scheduled. The building had experienced several burglaries despite a good security system, and Dr. Shnibitz realized that he might become a statistic. The evening news might carry pictures of his dead body.

There was somebody out there, no question. He could hear sounds of an intruder, even hard breathing. Some of his colleagues carried guns, had cans of Mace, warned him to be prepared. Theirs was a hazardous profession at best. But Dr. Shnibitz was a peaceable man who called himself a "black-belt conversationalist." His conceit was that he could negotiate himself out of any danger. At that moment he wasn't so sure. Suppose the thief were drugged beyond the spell of spoken word? Bang, it would be over. He would cease to exist as a man and become a scholarship, a memory, a collection of papers stored in a university library. He plucked the amulet from his mouth. How would the police interpret that? It would send them after some voodoo cult in Brooklyn.

To remain silent was the wrong tack. Better to announce his presence. That would be enough to frighten most petty criminals. And whoever it was would find his way into the consulting room anyhow. Dr. Shnibitz said in a strong voice, "Yes, who is it? Who are you and what do you want?"

The response was a guttural gurgle mingled with a growl. It was not a person out there, no felon; it was an animal, a beast, a predator. Dr.

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Shnibitz felt an old fear, the kind he once knew in the pitch dark of his parents' beach house on Cape Cod when the ocean seemed to lick at the windows. Well, he had learned to cope with that kind of terror. He took deep, slow breaths, moving quietly toward the thick office door. He flipped the lock, heard the bolt set. Whatever was out there would not have an easy time getting in. Dr. Shnibitz ran for his telephone. There was not time to dial.

The consultation room door disintegrated. It splintered and fell apart. Holding the phone, paralyzed with sheer amazement, Dr. Shnibitz saw what was standing there looking in at him. It was only a shape at first, like a fogbank, like steam spitting from a sewer grate. Then it crystallized. Dr. Shnibitz put down the telephone.

A man watched. The shape became a man. A man with horns. No, a man wearing a helmet that sprouted horns. A man with a bull's head. No, the face was human, mustached, bearded with a prow for a nose and enormous blue eyes. And the neck, thick as a thigh, a pedestal. The body, a chunk, a rock, covered in furs — black fur, brown fur, white fur. Bracelet-ed arms, poles with gold rings, hanging apelike from the trunk. Bare legs dangling, stubby legs heavy and muscled, the feet protected by boots made from russet leather skins. The man grunted at Dr. Shnibitz but made no move.

Instinctively, Dr. Shnibitz positioned himself behind his formidable desk. He sat in his chair, keeping control, aware that he fused with the desk, became a centaur with a mahogany frame. He knew the effect of that combination on even the most disturbed patients. It calmed them to be in such a presence.

"You have no appointment," Dr. Shnibitz said. "Leave now. Call my secretary, Ms. Rosen, in the morning. She'll give you a proper time."

The visitor came forward and paused at the Eames Chair where new patients sat outlining their misery. Great hands fondled the chair, then grabbed it up off its base and cracked it in two. The hands lifted the metal base and twisted at it. The metal bent and finally fractured.

"Impressive," said Dr. Shnibitz. "But hardly sensible. You're going to be billed for damages. I suggest you restrain yourself. We both know you're strong. Now tell me what you want here?"

"I am Attila."

"The Hun?"

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"You called me to come and kill you. The only reason I hesitate is curiosity."

"Of course the Hun."

"Your fixation is that you are Attila the Hun?"

"No fixation. It's who I am. The damned, accursed, bloodthirsty son-of-a-bitch Teuton who terrorized the civilized world and ate babies for dessert."

"Very well. I am Dr. Maxfield Shnibitz."

"Jesus, I know that much."

"Then we have the basis for communication."

"Possibly. But don't be smug. Don't give me shit about calling for an appointment. If you rub me the wrong way, I will straggle you with your own intestines."

"You feel aggressive?"

"I always feel aggressive. I am aggressive. You called me to come and kill you. The only reason I hesitate is curiosity. And I am in no hurry to return to Hell."

"I called you to come and kill me?"

"You sucked the amulet, wishing for death."

"I did not suck the amulet. I did insert it into my mouth in a purely unconscious gesture. But I was not wishing for death."

"You certainly were. I don't know your exact thoughts — something about boredom and challenge — but it added up to a definite death wish."

"Yes, I can see how you might have interpreted it that way. I do see that. You come from Hell?"

"I did. And you want to know what kind of place it is. Terrible. At first I enjoyed it. They had clever tortures, interesting agonies. But after centuries, repetition replaces surprise, and that is the worst torture."

"You feel tortured?"

"I am tortured. By professionals. Corporate professionals. With amoebic imagination. When I am called back by the amulet, I welcome the change. But I can't stay too long. They sulk. That is beyond endurance. So I will kill you now in the most amusing way possible. Would you like to be skinned alive? Broiled? What? Give me some guidance."

"Attila, if I may — and you call me Maxfield; forget the "Doctor" —

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if I did wish for death in my deepest unconscious, then that was a regressive, immature response to the curious mix of triumph and frustration at turning a patient loose. I do become involved with my patients. I don't want to die just yet, but thank you for making a prompt house call."

"I came for nothing? For nothing?"

Attila began to wring his hands. Dr. Shnibitz saw the neck bulge, the face turn purple.

"You want to break something?"

"I think I do. Yes. No. No, I don't want to break anything. I came to grant your wish, not dismantle your office."

"And you handle frustration in a most predictable way. Smash, burn, loot, rape, crow. That's what you want; admit it."

"I admit it. Big news. Patients pay you for such insight?"

"Snide remarks now. More anger. Perhaps your trip was not a total loss."

"I came to kill. Now you tell me you want to live. I came to do you a favor. You spurn my gesture. That's what I call a total loss. I haven't heard bones crunch in God knows how long."

"God? You said *God knows how long.*"

"I know what I said."

"Strange coming from Attila the Hun. Talk of God. Tell me, do you think about God very often?"

"Absolutely not. It was only an expression."

"Do you regret renouncing your place in Heaven? I assume there must be a Heaven if you say you live in Hell."

"Certainly there is a Heaven. I never thought much about it. My renunciation was made in the equivalent of kindergarten. I chose a lifestyle. That mandated a death-style."

"You must question the choice from time to time."

"Not really. Sometimes. But negative thinking is a waste of time and energy."

"Negative thinking? Don't you mean positive thinking?"

"Did I say negative? I meant positive."

"You must ask yourself if Heaven is better."

"You've never seen my rap sheet. In one lifetime I accomplished more than a thousand Mafias, a dozen Hitlers, fifty Vlad Tepises. My own Dobermans were afraid of me. I shed more blood than the American Medical

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Association. Heaven is a place I will never visit. If I were to come within a million leagues of Heaven, angels would throw up on me. No, Maxfield, I don't think much about Heaven as a viable alternative. Let me kill you. You go to Heaven. See for yourself. I'll crush your skull between your own feet. Nice headlines. Prime-time coverage. I'll rip off your ears."

"Just suppose, Attila, that you were to renounce your past life and ask forgiveness."

"Some are beyond redemption, as the phrase goes."

"Suppose, just suppose, that you could prove that your antisocial behavior was no fault of your own."

"That would make some difference. If I were a victim, well, they can appreciate that. It makes them feel guilty, as if they were conspirators, as if they failed. But in my case, a clear choice was made. I loved evil from my first breath. I bit my mother's nipples just for the Hell of it. No, Maxfield, I couldn't mount any kind of defense. I could never earn Gray Time."

"Gray Time?"

"The chance to live again. Make up for past indignities. If you can get them to grant an appeal, it is possible to earn a certain period of Gray Time."

"Return to life?"

"Naturally. Do good deeds. Tell ugly women they are beautiful. Cross cripples. Sympathize with the blind. Comfort the losers. Like that. Don't you watch television? They do that plot to death."

"Fascinating. Why not sit down on the couch and tell me about it. Better, lie down. Relax."

"I don't have all night. Suppose I peel back your lips and leave your skull exposed. Or unravel your navel. Or split your buttocks. You could have an interesting and provocative demise. You'd be the first topic of conversation tomorrow morning. They might even remember until evening. What do you say?"

"We'll decide about that later. Make yourself comfortable."

Attila bellowed a sigh. Dr. Shnibitz remembered his own recent sigh. He looked down at the amulet, still damp, draped over his appointment calendar. Talk about a challenge. To tempt the humanity in Attila the Hun. To give Gray Time to the deathmonger maniacs swear by. It would be a feather in any psychoanalyst's cap. Freud himself would give a testicle for the chance.

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Dr. Shnibitz watched his guest test the Naugahyde couch. Attila sat, suddenly reclined. Without thinking, Dr. Shnibitz slipped a paper doily under Attila's enormous head.

"What for?"

"Disposable."

"Ah."

"So you nipped at your mother's nipple just to see her reaction?"

"Yes, I did. Nice woman. Deserved better."

"And were you punished?"

"Harsh words, the usual. My father was the enforcer. When they first put me on the pot, he would make me sit for hours."

"You had a difficult toilet training?"

"Not difficult. Firm. Father was a disciplinarian. A nasty old bastard. Drank. Fermented goat's milk."

"And when he got drunk . . . ?"

"Behaved like a slob."

"And you attacked a source of milk . . . your mother's breasts. . . ."

"Are you suggesting that I was actually attacking my father?"

"You said that, not I."

"Hmmm. Funny about that. When I ordered all nonvirgins in Gaul to be eviscerated on the shortest day of the year, I had a dream about bosoms that looked like fountains. In fact, I ordered fountains that looked like bosoms. For my castle in the mountains. The snowcapped mountains. . . ."

"You ordered nonvirgins eviscerated on the shortest day of the year?"

"You're not suggesting that my first act of political violence was rooted in concern about the size of my phallus?"

"You said it. *Rooted.* Your words. Fountain bosoms . . . snowcapped mountains. . . ."

"Mom?"

"Possibly."

"But why would I associate my mother with concerns about the length of. . . ."

"Why? Why indeed? It's just possible that. . . ."

Attila jackknifed, stood, slammed his fist into the wall. Dr. Shnibitz had seen all that before.

"I've got to get back. If you want to go on living, fine. That's your problem. But I'm expected for skewering."

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"Wait just a minute. How can I best put this? Don't be so hard on yourself. Boys will be boys. Mothers are often the objects of desire, possessiveness. It isn't uncommon for a male child to feel inferior comparing his penis to his father's."

"Inferior? I never felt inferior. Didn't I build the tallest obelisk outside Egypt just outside my wading pool?"

"You built an obelisk outside your wading pool?"

"Well, yes, I did. To commemorate the sack of Rome. Or was it Constantinople?"

"An obelisk . . . a wading pool. . . ."

"Now tell me I sacked whatever it was I sacked just for an excuse to build an obelisk to prove I had an impressive organ to a wading pool. Come on, Maxfield."

"What were you doing with a wading pool?"

"I enjoyed wading. It was a nice round pool surrounded by pines."

"Wading? Or *waiting.* A nice round, wet pool surrounded by pines?"

"Oh, now, cut it out. Not Mom. If I accept all that, you could say every single act of vicious abandon I ever perpetrated was nothing but a charade to conceal a hidden desire to. . . ."

"You said it. I didn't."

"You know how to make a fellow feel cheap."

Attila began to cry. He rose from the couch and stared into a mirror on the far wall. That mirror had seen many such broken faces. Dr. Shnibitz came and put his arm around the sulking hulk.

"If you were a victim of an innocent childhood obsession, surely you don't deserve eternal damnation."

"Grounds for an appeal? Me?"

"Why not?"

"Maxfield, do you begin to realize what you've done for me?"

"All in a day's work. Sit and rest. Have yourself a glass of water. There's plenty in the pitcher on my desk."

"I feel wasted. Empty. Naked. Reborn."

While Attila sipped ice water, Dr. Shnibitz, elated, went to the outer office. He found a key in his pocket and opened a closet marked PRIVATE. The closet had not been opened in years. It had a musty smell. Dr. Shnibitz undressed to his underwear. From the closet he took a fur coat that had once belonged to his wife. It was repossessed during a nasty divorce settlement.

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He put on the coat, then a helmet crowned with the antlers of an eight-point buck, the gift of a saved bank president. A pair of sandals replaced his shoes, though he kept on his long socks because of a chill in the air. At the back of the closet, near a set of golf clubs, he found a sword and shield. He had bought them at the auction of an old woman's estate for no special reason beyond irony. Ready, he came back into his consulting room and stood with his legs wide apart. The sniveling mass on his couch sipped water and moaned while he beat his chest with a limp fist.

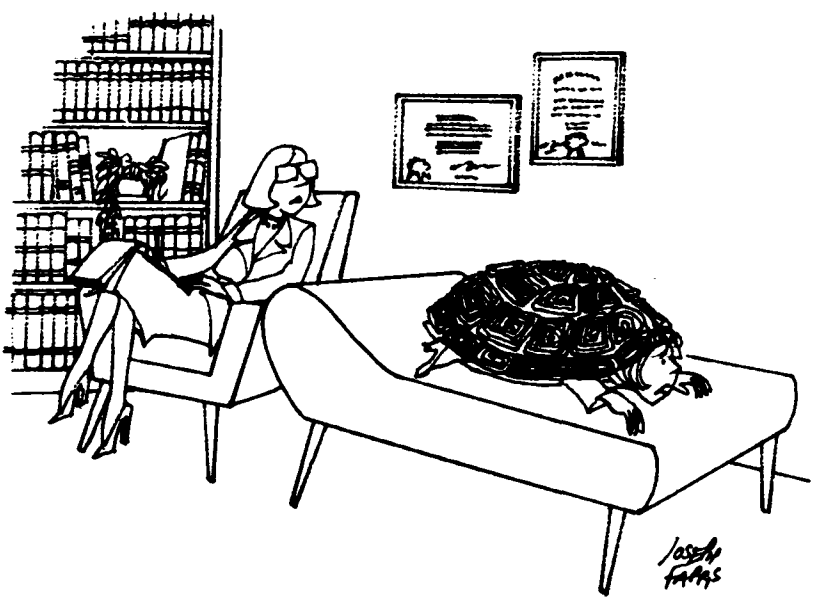
"Stand up and fight," Dr. Shnibitz yelled, waving the sword over his head. Attila looked up at him with watery eyes. The Hun only shrugged.

"Do battle, barbarian," said Dr. Shnibitz.

The Hun's eyes were blank.

"I demand you defend yourself."

Dr. Shnibitz leapt across the oriental rug and sank home his sword just under the thick neck. He felt very good, elated, ready to take on a multitude of neurotics. He made a mental note to send his former patient a brief thank-you note.



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James B. Johnson lives in Florida and is a full-time writer. He has previously published in Analog *and is the author of three novels, the last of which,* Mindhopper, *is due to be published in March 1988 by DAW. "The 'Ciders," his first story for* F & SF, *tells of a curious practice adopted by aliens who have come to Earth, and the impact it has upon two men in particular.*

The 'Ciders

By James B. Johnson

HIS NAME WAS Justin Twosleeps, but they called him Sleepy, and he needed a friend — probably because he didn't have one now, and never really had had one before in his life. He was part Pima Amerind and part something else, nobody knew what. He had been born in Tucson one of the first kids of the twenty-first century, one minute after midnight, Mountain Standard, two zero zero zero, almost nineteen years ago. Sometimes this made him sad because someone had told him that this was the only century he'd be alive in. If he'd a been born a few minutes earlier, he could say he'd lived in two centuries.

Other than his contracts with the 'Ciders, he led a quiet, simple life.

Sleepy was big and strong, he always figgered, on accounta God gave him strength of body to make up for giving him a weak mind. Sleepy sometimes wished that God had swapped things around a little more evenly. He had what the locals told the tourists about Amerinds: "strong and proud features." But his unknown father had contributed a definite

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pale tint to his skin. His hair was regulation black and seldom combed or brushed; maybe that was one of the reasons he got along with the 'Ciders. He hardly ever blinked, except when thinking, and could holler from canyon rim to canyon rim.

He was assigned to the 'Ciders' side of the Wigwam Motel and Skyhaven, he knew, because he was 'tarded — everybody said so. On the other hand, he often thought, his need of a friend maybe drove him to be friendly with them, too. Maybe they realized that thing. Hell, maybe they needed a friend, too. Jeez, they sure needed somebody. Maybe if they had friends, they wouldn't be here.

He didn't bother nobody, didn't piss nobody off, so they made him work on the aliens' side of the resort.

Currently, Sleepy was reading his favorite book, *Horton Hears A Who!* by that doctor, Seuss. Sleepy loved Doc Seuss on account of the words rolled so nicely and rhymed so strangely.

He read aloud, "A person's a person, no matter how small." He looked into the leaves of the birch tree above him and smiled and nodded sagely. "It's true," he said. Horton the elephant was fixin' to rescue this speck of dust with a town full of Whos on it. This dumbass kangaroo and the Wickersham Brothers, those monkeys, were gonna dunk the Whos into Beezle-Nut juice and drownd 'em all.

Something scratched at the back of Sleepy's mind. He was 'posed to be doin' something — oh yeah. Cleaning out the 'Ciders' latrine.

Sleepy thumbed through the rest of *Horton Hears A Who!* even though he knew the story by heart and could recollect each of the illustrations.

"Might rather herd goats again," he said, voice grumpy at the thought of what he hadda do.

He entered the single-level wing that was designed for the 'Ciders. There was only one bathroom they all used, just kinda squatted right there like a dog in the big, empty room. They hadda go in dirt, so Sleepy just ran the automatic water and flushed the defecations and thin layers of dirt down the drains in the floor. Miz Webb had said, "Don't call it shit, Sleepy. Call it defecations."

"Sure thing, Miz Webb."

Then Sleepy got his wheelbarrow and shovel and loaded some good ole Arizona dirt, and took it back to the 'Ciders' latrine and spread it around.

Funny, this place don't smell like a shithouse. It smelled like a newly

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plowed garden. Should it be called a "defecationhouse?"

He slowly wheeled his wheelbarrow down the central corridor. He wondered if he'd see a 'Cider today. He kind of liked the critter he'd met yesterday. It was yesterday, wasn't it?

Of course, that one coulda done already killed itself by now. Dumb bastards.

He returned the wheelbarrow to the shed and thought about the 'Ciders. Pudgy, somebody'd once said. The word seemed to fit their body. Hairy, with lots of folds of skin. Miz Webb said nobody could ever figger out how the 'Ciders got to be so smart or how they spread into the stars and came to Earth, what with their bodily limitations and allatime killin' theirselves off.

Sleepy shrugged and wondered if it was lunchtime. How did them 'Ciders eat with all them little teeny things buzzin' around their heads all the time, anyway?

Sleepy decided he was hungry, and therefore it was lunchtime. He walked toward the dining room with *Horton* under his arm. Maybe he'd read the page about the Mayor of Who-ville running all over town trying to get the Whos to raise a lot of noise. Sometimes Miz Webb's cook let him read to her while he ate in the kitchen.

He was walking across the huge parking lot to the human's wing of the Wigwam, when he spotted Miz Webb waving at him.

She had some man in tow behind her.

Sleepy had to fight off the dark side of his mind, which threatened to take over. Miz Webb would want him to do something. Dammit, he was hungry and he was gonna eat.

"Justin," her shrill voice called.

Sleepy pretended he didn't hear her, and continued heading for the kitchen. The cool mountain air increased his hunger.

"Justin, stop, darn it." She was the onliest one who called him by his legal front name.

She was angling for him, and he knew he had to stop.

He stopped and sulked. He studied the parking surface, which sometimes Miz Webb made him run the damn industrial vacuum cart over.

She came alongside of him and grabbed his arm. Only she could get away with that.

"Justin, thank you for stopping." Her voice held a certain amount of

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the old-style schoolmarm preachy in it. She was, to Sleepy, a crusty old broad who you couldn't fool a lot, not that he wanted to. But she sure made him work for his pay. She was at least twice as old as he was — maybe fifty; he wasn't gonna ask — with black hair braided like a real Injun was 'posed to, but she wasn't no Indian; she was something called a "New England Yankee."

The man caught up with them, and Miz Webb said, "Justin, I'd like you to meet someone. Mr. Smythe-Waltingham."

The man, older than Sleepy but younger than Miz Webb, stuck out his hand. He had red hair on his head and wore a jumpsuit. He flashed a smile. "Call me Smitty, huh?"

Miz Webb said, "And this is Justin Twosleeps."

Tentatively, Justin took Smitty's hand. "Call me Sleepy; everybody does." He spoke slowly.

"Sure thing, kid." Smitty's eyes seemed to never stop moving. They bounced around like they were dodging them little things around 'Ciders heads.

"Not kid. Sleepy."

"Oh sure, kid."

"Listen," Miz Webb said, "Justin, I want you to show Mr. Smythe-whatever around. He is a photographer and wants to take pictures of this area, especially the Grand Canyon."

"Yes'm. Can I eat now?"

"You will be responsible, Justin. It's a very important job. You can be a good guide when you want to."

One of the "Big" words Sleepy knew the meaning of was "patronizing," because he got so much of it. A therapist had once explained it to him. Miz Webb was patronizing him again. Hell, most people patronized him. He merely looked at the ground again.

"Justin, you remember the rules. I know you get along with the 'Ciders, but we can't take a chance of interfering."

"Yes'm," he mumbled.

"Keep away from their areas, O.K., Justin?"

"Yes'm. I'm hungry."

"It's a little early, kid," said Smitty, "but, hell, I'll stand you to chow." He shot Sleepy a quick grin.

Sleepy didn't know what to say or do.

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Miz Webb put her hand on Smitty's arm. "He eats by himself, Mr. Smitty-Waltzburger. Perhaps you can eat with the other guests and get together with Justin right after lunch?"

"Sure. O.K. with you, kid?"

Sleepy nodded quickly and shuffled off for the kitchen.

HEY, KID. I brought you a present."

Sleepy looked up from *Horton*. He was sitting on a tourist overlook of this portion of the Grand Canyon. He loved it when the winds were fast and strong. It helped drive the loneliness away. He was perched on a cliff on the canyon rim side of the retaining fence, in front of the coin-operated view glasses. The dizzying height and strong winds exhilarated him, cooled the dark side of his mind; it all gave him his own personal world.

In Sleepy's room, back at the resort, was a teevee that he watched a lot. It got satellite, all systems. But he loved to watch the closed-circuit broadcast about the Wigwam and the Grand Canyon and stuff. Among all those exotic places on teevee was his place. Tourists could punch up the broadcast tapes and watch all about this area and the rest of the Grand Canyon. Of course, he watched it a lot because when they had filmed one of the spots, he was in it. Miz Webb had let him carry a tourist's suitcase up the wide front steps of the lodge while the camera crew panned the entire structure.

So Sleepy knew all the tapes word for word, even big ones, and could generally recite them, too.

They was on the North Rim, on the Kaibab Plateau, just south of the Kaibab National Forest. You could look down and see the Colorado River far below; you could see Steamboat Mountain, elevation 7,425, and Powell Plateau. Across the canyon, sticking out like a sore thumb off the Havasupai Reservation lands, was Great Thumb Point, elevation sixty-six hundred.

There were no tourists about now, probably because the wind was so cold and cutting.

"Nice view, huh, kid? How far over there?" Smitty was looking at him strangely, proby accounta he was hanging over the edge of the cliff. But at least Smitty din't say nothin' about it.

Sleepy closed his eyes and quoted: ". . . one of the world's most out-

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standing geologic speck-tackles. Average ten miles wide for its 277-mile length and is fifty-seven hundred feet deep measured here from the North Rim. Way over there is the Painted Desert. Right over there is Havasu Canyon. Rock strata clearly mark periods of Earth's history, showing time's incessant panorama at its glory."

Smitty was looking at him strangely again. "Hey, thanks, kid. Glad to know it. What's the weird thing way out there?" He stuck his pointy finger over sorta toward Galahad Point, elevation seventy-nine hundred feet.

"Last Stop." Sleepy eyes the distinctive inverted cone and shivered. The dark side reached out. To shake off the feeling, he grasped the rail and climbed up beside Smitty.

"Last Stop?" Smitty was scratching his head and heading for a viewer. "Isn't that where the 'Ciders. . . ."

Sleepy nodded. "Smitty?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Why do some people call 'em Croakers?"

"It's like a racial insult, Sleepy, because their voices sound a little like a frog. Which makes it also coincidentally refer to their suicidal tendencies."

"I like their voices. They sound beautiful to me." Sleepy was becoming defensive.

"*You* talk to them?"

"Sure. Allatime."

"They don't talk to *anybody*."

"They do to me."

"You and me are gonna get along well, kid. Here," said Smitty. He handed Sleepy an oblong paperback book. Smitty had a camera hanging from his neck.

Sleepy took the book and slowly read the title aloud: "*Garfield's Not Quite 50th Birthday Book.*" Sleepy stumbled over "50th." He looked at Smitty. "Gee, Mr. Smitty. Thanks. Nobody never gives me presents." Sleepy couldn't believe it. Not to mention that he loved Garfield and had read *two* of his books he'd found left lying around in the lobby. He empathized mostly with Odie, the dog. Although, his thoughts caught up with his thinking, Miz Webb gives me presents on Christmas and my birthday. But those were always clothes, and not really presents. Could be a good thing, because he din't really know how to pick out the right clothes.

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Smitty was waiting patiently for him to thumb through the cartoon book. As he did so, Smitty dropped in coins and studied the Grand Canyon. "Big damn thing, ain't it? Takes your breath away."

For a couple of hours, Sleepy took Smitty around to the various tourist observation decks and platforms. He steered them away from the 'Ciders' reserved locations.

"How come we can't go where those aliens are, kid?" Smitty asked as they skirted one of the places.

"On accounta we might bother them."

"So what?"

"They might be bothered," Sleepy explained slowly, "and kill theirselves."

"Hell, that's what they're here for anyway, ain't it?"

Sleepy thought about this seeming contradiction and became confused. He sort of nodded and shrugged at the same time, showing his bewilderment.

They were walking through a pine forest. Smitty said, "Um, kid, how come you talk to the aliens?"

"Got to — can't write good."

'Ciders loved to write — that's what they liked about Earth, he'd heard. They loved the difficulty of languages called Japanese and Chinese, and the "nuances of English," and "American slang and idioms," as the tourist briefings in the Wigwam's lobby and on their teevee system droned day and night.

When Smitty dismissed him, Sleepy followed Smitty around anyway. He sat on the floor outside the photographer's room and followed him to the bar, waiting outside, and to the dining room later.

He had a friend!

Sleepy was too excited to read Garfield; he just kept thumbing through the book, glancing at individual panels, quickly memorizing his favorite Garfield expressions.

And that night, Sleepy fantasized about Doc Seuss writing a book about "Smitty and Sleepy." It had a super ring to it.

Over the next week, Sleepy escorted Smitty into the canyon daily on muleback trips, and once on a motorized raft. Smitty learned the area.

And always did Smitty ask questions about Last Stop, the lonely, in-

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verted cone in a desolate area offset from Steamboat Mountain. Last Stop rose slightly above the 7,425 feet of Steamboat, and overshadowed Powell Plateau.

"Damn thing's off-limits. Can't we go over there, kid?"

"No, Smitty, it's against the rules."

"Whose rules are they? I wanna know. My inquiring mind wants to know."

"The gummint's rules, Smitty. Miz Webb, too; she don't allow it."

Smitty groaned, awkwardly pulled his right leg over the saddle horn, and slipped off the mule. "You'd think they could invent a machine could do this better than a damn mule." He pushed the mule away by its shoulder.

Sleepy dismounted and took the reins of both animals and secured them to a scrub. He sat next to Smitty and drank from a cold-pack container.

"You been lyin' to me, Smitty; I can tell."

Smitty's head jerked around. "Huh?"

Sleepy saw it in his eyes. "I see it in your eyes."

Smitty shrugged. He seemed to reach some conclusion. "Naah, kid. I haven't really lied to you. I like you, kid, I really do. If I've lied, it's been by omission."

Sleepy cocked his head questioningly. "Huh?"

Smitty's voice took on tones of exasperation. "It means I didn't tell you everything."

"Yep, I figgered."

"Look, kid, you keep this under your hat?"

Sleepy removed his *RED MAN CHEWING TOBACCO* cap and looked within.

Smitty rolled his eyes. "I got to take a chance with you. You're my friend and all. I am a photographer. But I'm also a reporter. For ESS, Enquirer Satellite Systems. I want an interview with a 'Cider just before he suicides. I want to hear it from him why."

"Oh," said Sleepy in a very small voice.

"And that's not all. I want to film his suicide plunge. I want to see it happen, night or day, preferably both. I want to know *exactly* what happens to those little motes that circle the aliens all the time. I want to know what happens to them when the alien dies. None of it makes any

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damn sense at all." He took his own cold pack out and rubbed it across his forehead. "Forping technology is great, ain't it?"

Sleepy was still thinking over what Smitty had just told him. Finally he said, "Why?"

Smitty's shoulders drooped a little. His voice became bitter. "Success, they want constant success, better than before, always bigger and better." He stopped abruptly.

Sleepy's empathy leaped. "You are not doing well in your job." It occurred to him, too, that Smitty wasn't all that important; otherwise he wouldn't have Sleepy as a guide.

"I just haven't did nothin' lately — hah, listen to me; I'm beginning to sound like you."

Which Sleepy took as a compliment and smiled.

Smitty looked at his cold pack. "Shoulda brought beer. Makes me pee a lot, but shoulda brought it." He paused and sipped. "Yeah. Dead end. That's my career. I figured that I'd come out here to the Grand Canyon and film the suicides, if I could. I sure didn't want to go to Tibet or that place over by Victoria Falls, not me. That left the Grand Canyon, and here the hell I am."

"Don't be mad, Smitty, please? I can't stand you like that." Sleepy's voice was pleading.

"Shit, kid, whattya do when your life's at an end, no future?" He glanced guiltily at Sleepy, but Sleepy was engrossed in listening and showed no reaction. Then his face went back to its normal set. He scrunched it up in an attempt at self-pity, but couldn't hold it. Finally his face took on the equivalent of a shrug. "Everybody's got a college degree nowadays. All backstabbers and backclimbers. Not me. Hell, I was busy chasing girls and wild geese."

Smitty held out a piece of wild onion, and his mule snapped it out of his hand. "Huh?"

"Nothing, kid, nothing."

"It'll be O.K., Smitty. It will."

There was a tangible exchange of empathy, and Smitty seemed to relax. "Yeah, sure. Tell me about these aliens. I can't even say their name. Sounds like a frog saying 'Bmroak.' They speak English?"

"Beats me," said Sleepy. "They speak American to me."

"Yeah, right, kid. I forgot. You don't write too well."

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"There's something in their body or mind or heart that makes 'em kill themselves off."

"Nope. Smitty? Why don't they like to talk to us? To people, I mean."

"It's the way they've evolved, Sleepy. They're so prone to suicide, it's like a racial or a genetic imperative with 'em." He scratched his head. "Stupid *motherforpers.*"

Sleepy was nodding and digging out a sandwich. He offered Smitty a ham and cheese. "What's that mean?"

Smitty took the sandwich and looked up at the sky. A turkey buzzard flew over. "It means there's something in their body or mind or heart that makes 'em kill themselves off. It's why their voices are harsh — from little use. Since they take umbrage — see, I know some big words, kid — I mean, since they get pissed off or embarrassed easy, and don't fight, something inside 'em makes 'em kill their . . . themselves. So they developed a written language quicker and write down on their slates their conversations. That way they got time to think and write down nicely what they want to say, and can word their conversations delicately and not piss each other off, so as not to kill off each other. I guess they just can't help it."

Sleepy nodded violently, a droplet of mustard flying and landing on the rock on which they were sitting. "Me, too. Lots of times I just can't help it."

Smitty looked at him for a long time. "I guess so. But you hang in there all right."

Sleepy shrugged and thought of the dark side of his mind overwhelming him sometimes. Nothing violent, just a black mood, a blackness within his heart and mind and head surging over him like a goddamn wave. . . .

Smitty finished his sandwich and dug some Oreos out of his bag. He lifted his sunglasses to inspect one of the cookies. He took off his sunglasses and put them beside him on the rock and began prying halves of Oreos away from each other. "Got any peanut butter?"

Sleepy shook his head and watched wonderingly.

"Too bad. Try it sometime." Impulsively he handed Sleepy some Oreos. Smitty ate one of his own, careful to lick the filling off first.

Sleepy imitated him and felt like a kid at his first birthday party.

Smitty was looking southeast toward Last Stop. "That genetic imperative I was talking about, kid. Not only do they kill themselves off, the

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'Ciders, if they get hurt or embarrassed or pissed, but they know when they're about to die. They make preparations and kill themselves before they die."

"I know. It's why they come to the Wigwam." Sleepy ate another Oreo.

"I've heard they talk a lot in the passive voice, is that right?"

"Huh?" Sleepy licked the cream filling from another Oreo half.

"They say things like, 'It is necessary that I biologically eliminate,' instead of saying, 'I gotta take a shit' — is that right?" He paused and grinned. Politicians say, 'Additional sources of revenue should be located,' insteada sayin', 'We need to raise taxes' — that's a good example."

"I guess." Sleepy had peeled his ham and cheese sandwich and was licking the mustard and mayonnaise from one slice of bread.

Smitty sighed and leaned back lazily. "You know, you could commit genocide just by running around their home planet shouting insults and being mean. Probably why we ain't supposed to find out where they come from. Humans inadvertently killed a bunch of them before we learned to communicate with 'em without hurting their feelings. Look, kid, I need info. I heard the only time they won't suicide is when they're pregnant. Is that right?"

"Beats me." Sleepy was tearing little round circles of ham and cheese and stuffing them between two Oreo halves.

Smitty looked at him and sighed. "You know, kid, you and me, we're a pair."

With sudden empathetic insight, Justin Twosleeps knew what Smitty said was good, and it was true, and it was right. The ever-present dark side of his mind receded just a bit.

Smitty pounded his hand into his other palm. "I'm not too bright, but it occurs to me to wonder how the hell these 'Ciders kept a civilization going like they have. How did they ever become high tech? How can they be so stupid and go so far?" Once again he looked guiltily at Sleepy. When there was no apparent response, he continued. " 'Course, I still don't understand why homosexuality hasn't bred itself out of existence. Why me, Lord?"

"Do you talk to God, Smitty?"

"Might as well — get about as many answers that way."

"Psst, Justin, is that him coming?"

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"I think so, Smitty," Sleepy answered.

They were partially concealed by a bush on a scenic overlook, one that was a slab with no fence, designed specifically for the 'Ciders. The air was wet and promised rain. Great gray clouds passed right over them.

The dark side of Sleepy's mind seemed to reach out for the dark underbellies of the clouds. As thunder rolled off in the distance, Sleepy sensed an affinity with the world at this time and this place.

"I hope that noise isn't a Department of the Interior inspector," Smitty said nervously.

"That's him!" Sleepy whispered. "He's been here a couple of days. He still comes here to think and pray and plan his suicide."

Smitty rubbed his hands. He adjusted the camera hanging from his neck and pushed the self-test for the sound. Everything checked. He'd have this on video with accompanying sound.

The 'Cider came out of the forest trail onto the overlook. He rose to his two feet, and the strong wind blew the long black hair that hung from the folds of skin throughout his body.

For the first time, Justin Twosleeps got a good look at the face of one of the aliens. Most of the time the view was messed up by those little tiny things they called motes buzzing around their face. The face reminded Sleepy of a not fully developed human face, sorta smashed in. Sleepy sensed more than saw the tiny dots about the 'Cider's face; must be the motes clinging to avoid being carried off in the wind. Sleepy thought he could see the motes going in and out of the alien's mouth, noseholes, eyes. From previous closer looks, he knew, too, that the motes lived and bred in the folds of skin on the body. The long hair must be some kind of protection.

The 'Cider seemed to sense Sleepy and Smitty and turned to face them. Its eyes grew large, but Sleepy knew the aliens couldn't see too well, most of the time having the motes flying around their head in those screwy little patterns and getting in the way of the 'Ciders seeing anything.

The thing squinted, lumbered closer to Sleepy and Smitty, and peered at them.

Sleepy stood, feeling guilty, and stepped out from behind the bush. Smitty followed, his eyes roamed faster than ever.

Momentarily sheltered from the wind, the 'Cider seemed to change. The motes appeared, primarily around its head, and began what Sleepy

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liked to call their dance. It reminded him of stuff he'd seen on the teevee, those little tiny things swirling around the atoms, or molecules, or one of them damn science things, but a much more involved pattern. *He* could see the pattern, when the motes danced, but not in any of the stuff he'd seen on teevee had they ever mentioned a pattern. Or dancing. They just said they floated and flew about the aliens' bodies, especially the head.

'Course, them guys on teevee ain't never talked to as many, or even any, of the 'Ciders. Sleepy knew that, of the many people on Earth, he held a special position. It was one of the few things that contributed to his own feelings of self-importance.

Sleepy cleared his throat. "Hello, sir. It's me. Justin Twosleeps."

The thing grunted.

"And this is my friend, Smitty." Sleepy jerked his head at Smitty, who moved up to Sleepy's elbow, obviously being careful so that Sleepy wouldn't screen his full camera view.

The 'Cider simply stood there.

"Um, Smitty would like to talk to you; is that O.K.?"

A ripple shook its body and dislodged a swarm of motes, which seemed to buzz angrily about the 'Cider.

"Justin," Smitty said quietly, "how do you know he's a 'he'?"

"I don't. I call 'em all that." Sleepy felt funny talking about the 'Cider in front of him like he was a kid or something. People did that to Sleepy all the time, and he knew how it felt.

The thing croaked. "It is procedure and rules now that I be alone."

"Oh, uh, sorry sir." Sleepy was at a loss. When he had talked to 'Ciders before, it was for specific purposes that gave the conversations their reasons for being.

Smitty stepped a little to the side. "Excuse, me, too, sir. I am a legit reporter. I can show you my ID and my union card. I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind."

"It would be far from me to talk; reporters are not agenda-ized."

"Justin," Smitty said in a different and harder voice, "I think he's gonna hurt our feelings by being discourteous to us." Smitty didn't take his eyes off the alien.

Sleepy sensed the motes around the thing increase their speed and change their pattern.

The alien pulled the slate, which hung on a cord over his shoulder, to

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the front and began writing with an electronic pen. He held the slate up to Smitty.

Smitty read it aloud. " 'There was no intention to so do, it is only to please that I exist.' That's cool, good sir. Except that my eyes hurt, and I can't read very well out here in the sun. Could we talk?"

Sleepy figgered that Smitty wanted to record the words out loud and couldn't if the alien was writing on the slate.

The 'Cider squatted in front of them. Sleepy's empathy center felt how Smitty had tricked it, and that the alien was really trapped. The alien sighed, just like a person.

Smitty wasted no time. "I'd like to get to the root of your suicide phenomena — say, what's your name?"

The thing croaked. "Names possess no value if known."

"Say, what?" Smitty looked at Sleepy.

"They're hard to understand at first, Smitty. He said he ain't tellin' his name."

Smitty nodded. "I got the 'no value' part." He turned back to the 'Cider and shifted his feet. "Should I call you sir or ma'am?"

Motes swarmed. "Gender. It is not a question to be answered."

"How come?"

The thing looked perplexed to Sleepy. "If gender is known to outsiders, vulnerability increases."

Smitty looked at Sleepy. "I'm beginning to understand his words, Justin." He paused. "Um, could we discuss your proclivity for suicide? I'd like to know why you-all do that? And your personal case."

"That is a question?" the thing croaked.

Smitty nodded and, when the alien failed to respond, said, "Yes, those were my questions."

"You would have an entire cultural history summed up in a brief, urp, response to a single question."

Smitty scratched his head. "Yeah, I guess that's what I'm doing."

"Passiveness and nonagression mark our race. Inter- and intracooperation are the paths we followed. Consequently, we became vulnerable to those opposites."

Sleepy hoped Smitty knew what the alien was talking about.

Smitty appeared to jump on a point. "Aha! Us people here on Earth got big mouths, especially where I come from. How come you-all chose Earth?

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I'd think it would be dangerous, the way we stumble around and accidentally insult each other all the time, not to mention a bunch of aliens we do not understand to start with."

The 'Cider paused as if to digest and translate. His voice took on a new interest. "Very true, as far as we are concerned. Our vulnerability becomes our strength. Once communication is established with another race, evaluations are made whether to associate or not . . ."

"It figgers," Smitty nodded.

". . . and Earth humans failed out tests."

"And?" Smitty prompted.

Sleepy pulled out a package of Oreos and began splitting cookies in half. He put the finished products on a bench.

"Unintended insults from Earth humans drive us into a suicidal frenzy. This combined with the appropriate arena for the suicide made us alter our decision."

"Translated," Smitty said, "means you come to Earth to die."

"Correct," the alien croaked.

Sleepy peeled the filling off three Oreo halves with his buck knife and licked it off the blade.

"There must be a reason, though." Smitty frowned. "Hell, you can kill yourself anywhere, anytime. So what?"

The 'Cider's tongue lashed out and brushed a mote off a fold of flesh on his cheek. "The locales for Final Ending are unique. It would please me to not speak on it further."

Smitty said, "I'd be terribly displeased, frankly, if I didn't hear the whole story."

Sleepy took out a squeeze tube of jalapeño cheese dip and squirted a blob on one Oreo half, added the other half, and downed it in one bite. He sighed contentedly.

A shudder seemed to go through the 'Cider's body. More motes seemed disturbed. Its voice seemed to drone as if it had lost its life. "The Final Act is committed under the best circumstances possible. Uniqueness ranks highly. From the promontory at the top of Last Stop" — he vaguely waved off toward Last Stop — "much of eons of evolution of the universe is visible. The geologic colors are somber, sufficient unto melding during the plunge." The voice droned on. "Significant to the Last Action is the aspect of total freedom."

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"What the hell?"

Sleepy glanced sharply at Smitty. Smitty had figgered something out. For once, Smitty's eyes were steady and clear, didn't bounce a bit.

The 'Cider croaked. "Much over a mile. Total glorious freedom. Actual flying. Our bodies have restricted movement, and we yearn for that last bit of freedom. It is why we come out on this promontory to meditate and anticipate the Final Leap. It builds within our minds greatly until the pressure is inevitable, and the internal mechanisms driving such allows us to telescope time during that Last Leap. Thus it becomes the culmination of a lifetime, an anticipated blessing, a reward." Its voice became harsher. "A quick lifetime of riding a gravity wave to The End. Blessed is freedom."

"Wow!" said Sleepy as he cleaned his nails with his buck knife.

Smitty nodded knowingly. "Hell, it sounds great to me. The damn pressure builds until you wanna. . . . Ah hell, what's the use?"

Sleepy sensed the empathy flowing between the 'Cider and Smitty.

"And there's one more thing, isn't there?" Smitty said, voice practically whispering.

The empathy exchange between the two was the most Sleepy had ever encountered between two strangers.

"Understanding reaches you," croaked the alien. It rose from its squatting position. "The internal explosion is cresting. I must go and prepare."

Smitty sighed. "Yeah. I got a million more questions, but I will not hold you up any longer. I feel your compulsion."

The 'Cider merely turned and lumbered off. To Sleepy, the motes seemed to dance more excitedly around the thing.

"Good luck!" called Smitty.

"What's wrong, Smitty? At the end there, everything changed." Sleepy holstered his buck knife.

"Yeah, kid. It did change, didn't it?" Smitty sat on the bench, dislodging a single Oreo half. "It built up within him so that he's gotta do it, else something within him'll explode."

"What's the other thing you were talking about, Smitty?"

Smitty looked at him. "You don't miss much, kid. I'm impressed. What he-she-it was saying was that for one time in its entire life, flying to die, it's free of the motes. It is itself."

"Gee, I never thought of that."

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"Me neither."

Sleepy turned to look at Last Stop. A fat, dark cloud boiled over it, and the promontory gutted the underbelly of the cloud.

Smitty began pacing back and forth. To Sleepy, Smitty appeared to be himself again.

Smitty glanced at his watch. "Not long until dark. Suppose our friend who just left can't last until morning. Suppose, too, that we were situated somewhere under Last Stop with appropriate night camera; we could record the whole thing. All we'd have to do is follow — wait a minute. How do they reach the top of Last Stop?"

"Miz Webb generally flies 'em over on her chopper when they ask her."

Smitty's fist slammed into his left hand. "By God, we'll beat 'em to it. If we hustle back, we can get my camera equipment and be down that freightavator to the canyon before dark. If we're lucky, we can make it to the base of Last Stop before our friend croaks hisself."

"Gee, I dunno, Smitty. . . ."

Smitty's eyes bounced over everything, lighting on few, but ever moving. "You ain't gonna desert me now, are you, Justin? Me, your friend?"

"Well. . . ."

"Of course, I wouldn't expect you to just do it for free; it'd be like overtime, you know. Hell, I'll toss in a couple more Garfield books, how's that?"

"And some Oreos?"

"Yeah, I'll bring the Oreos; you bring the peanut butter."

"A picnic."

"Yeah, kid, a picnic to watch a suicide."

THEY TOOK the North Rim freightavator to the canyon floor. The 'vator, large enough to hold entire mule parties, carried the two of them and their trail bikes easily.

Smitty mounted his bike awkwardly because of the camera and equipment dangling from his neck down his front and back. "The sixty-four-diamond question, my friend, is what happens to them little motes after the 'Cider croaks? That's the question."

Justin Twosleeps checked his pack for the squeeze tubes of peanut butter. He also had, as a surprise for Smitty, some cold packs of beer. "Gee, I dunno. Never thought about it."

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"My guess would be that their relationship is something like a parasite, so once the body dries up, no more chow for the moties, and they kinda blow away dead. That's my guess. Say, how far is it?"

"Coupla hours on accounta the dark."

"We're wastin' time. Keep your eyes peeled for the chopper. Don't wanna miss anything."

They had to park the bikes and hike the last mile.

Smitty followed Justin across a boulder, dropping heavily on the other side. "Damn. This ain't easy. But those motes, they're really bothering me. . . . Say, kid?"

"Yeah, Smitty?"

"What do they do with the bodies?"

"What bodies?"

"Of the 'Ciders. After they, um, land. The dead 'Ciders."

"Beats me. I never heard of nobody doin' nothin' with 'em." He leaped a small feeder creek that obviously ran into the Colorado.

Smitty nodded. "After falling over seven thousand feet, probably not much left to pick up. Have to use an industrial vacuum."

Sleepy felt a pang of guilt. *He* ran an industrial vacuum on the parking lot sometimes. But that wasn't what Smitty meant. Maybe it was just a joke.

A coyote howled. The wind blew. Most of the clouds of the afternoon had blown off, and the skies were clearing.

They reached the base of the mountain at eleven that night.

"Where will he jump from, kid? We need to orientate ourselves with the, um, landing zone."

Sleepy stared up. Last Stop loomed above them. "I think that's it." He pointed.

"Here, kid. Look through this." Smitty handed Sleepy his camera. "You can read the brand on a gnat's ass at night from five miles off with that thing."

"Gee, it's neat, Smitty." Justin looked through the viewport, and Last Stop jumped into perspective as if it were daylight.

"Rotate this" — Smitty had his hand on the front of the camera — "and it will home in on anything you want."

Sleepy turned the wheel and located the promontory atop Last Stop. Moving the camera around, up and down the path a 'Cider would take, he

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figured. "About a half mile that way." He pointed to the southwest.

"Fine. Let's go. Not that far, though. About half that. I wanta have a good view of the whole thing. Too close and the sumbitch will hit our heads."

Shortly the two were atop a giant boulder, and Smitty had his camera set up on a tripod. "Be able to track his trajectory and follow it better. Electronics, ain't they wonderful?"

He sank onto the boulder. "Well, hell. I'm ready. How about a cookie?"

"Great. I brung the peanut butter."

Smitty looked at him. "Fine, kid, fine." He craned his neck, checking out the sky. "No sign of 'em."

"Smitty?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"I brang you a present." He dug into his pack and came out with an even dozen cold packs of beer.

"I'll be dipped in spit. Colorado Kool-Aid. Thanks, kid. This'll pass the time." He thought, then giggled. "It'll pass more than time, too."

Sleepy was busy prying Oreos in half.

By two in the morning, Sleepy had finished off the package of Oreos and was sucking on the remnants of peanut butter in the tube. He felt sick to his stomach. He knew he shouldn't have eaten all the cookies.

Smitty had just finished the last beer and had peed noisily off the downwind side of the boulder. Sleepy knew his friend was drunk.

"Where in *hell* are they?" Smitty demanded, and belched loudly. He grinned at Sleepy. "Sounded just like a goddamned 'Cider, I did. Damn croakers. Lemme tell you what's wrong with the whole goddamn bunch of 'em. They don't face their problems, not one of 'em. Forpin' things get so forpin' bad, they croak theirselves. Run out of their problems. Big forpin' deal." He halted and sniffed. "Say, what's that smell?"

The wind changed, and Sleepy had noticed the smell awhile before. "I'd say it was dead 'Ciders," he said offhandedly.

"Jesus." Smitty coughed. "Smells like somebody crossed a cabbage with a burning tire and then killed it. What the hell they eat to smell like that?"

"Beats me."

"Shit, Justin, I'm drunk." Smitty still stood unsteadily.

Justin jumped up. "Hey. I hear something."

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"Me, too. Boyoboyoboy."

More than a mile above them, a chopper hovered into view, running lights making an odd pattern against the night sky. It touched the promontory atop Last Stop momentarily, then shied away, swinging out of sight.

Smitty went to his camera and checked it. "Everything O.K. It's recording. As soon as he leaps, I hit the tracking control, and the camera follows. . . ." He was peering through the viewer. "Hey! There he comes. He's standing there. Right on the edge. God, he's really gonna do it. Damn, I gotta pee again." But Smitty didn't move. His eye remained glued to the viewer. "When's he gonna do something?"

"Beats me." But Sleepy was panicking. Something was wrong. His empathy became a solid thing, a vibrant thing seemingly attached to the promontory of Last Stop.

"Nooo," he cried. Tears fell from his eyes. He gathered his legs in his arms and rocked back and forth. "Noooo."

"Jesus, kid, gimme a break."

Sleepy crawled to the edge of the boulder and threw up Oreos and peanut butter. He crawled back to his place and resumed his position, head buried between his knees and rocking.

Smitty cleared his throat. "You all right, kid?" When Sleepy didn't answer, he said, "Jeez. Lookit that. The IR lens can pick up the motes. They're little orange sparks, all flying around the alien like they was charged electrons and atoms and stuff."

"Noooo. Noooo." The dark side of Sleepy's mind reached out for him. His energy was being spent holding the empathy bond above, and he couldn't fight the dark side. It seeped out and blanketed his mind and his heart. "Noooo. Noooo." He rocked some more.

"Our friend is gonna get away from the motes. He's looked forward his whole life to escaping them. God, how I feel for the guy. I even admire him."

"Noooo. Noooo."

"Hey, kid, you're giving me the creepies. Calm down, huh? Jeez, I gotta pee bad."

"Noooo. Noooo." Sleepy's voice got louder. He was suddenly afraid.

"I think he's about to jump, kid! Jesus. There he goes."

Sleepy's voice rose to a scream. "Noooooooooooo!"

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"Christ on a sawhorse. His arms wide. He just toppled over. Here he comes. Goin' faster. Sumbitch. Them little tiny sparks flyin' out behind him, stuck in his air envelope. But behind him. I almost think I can read his face. He's happy as hell. Goddamn, I'm trackin' it fine. Shit hot. His mouth ain't movin' or nothin'. You'd think he'd be screamin' like a forpin' banshee. The motes are still followin' him, sorta in his wake, but they're fallin' behind. Ain't gonna be long now."

Sleepy's scream was wordless now.

"Bam! That's it. The forper's a goner. Goddamn."

Sleepy's scream stopped abruptly as if cut in half. The dark side of his mind had taken control. Only one thing he liked about this, and that was that the 'Cider had gotten what he wanted. At what cost? To all of them?

Sleepy's face was still buried in his knees.

"God, I feel bad, kid. What a rotten deal. Uh-oh. There's a little cloud of sparks above where the 'Cider pronged in. They're circling sorta aimlessly, and then they're . . . it's like they're riding the wind. This way. Jesus, kid. I don't like this. Shit, what we gonna do?"

Justin Twosleeps stood. He faced the direction the motes were coming from. He felt them approaching. Smitty had the nighttime camera and could see things better. The dark side of Sleepy's mind sloshed back and forth like a monster trying to escape containment.

"Jeez, Justin, here they come." Smitty's voice held more awe than before.

Sleepy extended his arms.

"Goddamn!" said Smitty.

Sleepy closed his eyes. He felt stinging sensations all over his body. There was a buzzing in his ears and then sharp pain. His nostrils became clogged for a moment. Tears eked from his eyes. A scouring pain came from his anus. His belly button felt like it was full of fire ants.

Then sparks lighted up the darkness within his mind like stars suddenly appearing at night. They bounced together and apart, and the dark side receded. Sparks glowed within him, like distant fireflies, brightening what was left of the rapidly dwindling dark side.

Sleepy felt more confident. A feeling of well-being washed over him. He opened his mouth to smile and felt motes swarm in and out. He opened his eyes and saw as if through a cloud. Motes were circling his head, weaving their/his own personal pattern.

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Smitty was standing at the edge of the boulder, his camera clutched to his breast.

"What the forpin' hell is goin' on?" Smitty demanded.

Sleepy tried to speak, but a burning sensation sizzled in his throat. Something had gotten to his vocal chords.. "Broahk," he croaked, trying to clear his throat.

Smitty's eyes were big as the moon, staring at Sleepy. Smitty cowered on the edge of the boulder, clutching his camera for all he was worth. Justin's empathy reached out for his friend.

"Smitty? Do not be alarmed. Please? It is neither my intention to harm you nor to subordinate you to myself." His voice was coming out low and raspy. The motes had infested his throat.

Smitty scrambled for the ledge they'd used to climb to the surface of the boulder.

Justin croaked. "Smitty? You have nothing to fear. You will not be *immersed*. The motes are not inimical. I won't hurt you." At least, he thought, no passive voice.

Smitty rose to his knees still with a death hold on his camera. "You won't take my film?"

"Why should I?"

Smitty looked down. "I dunno. That's the way it would happen. My biggest moment. Nothin's ever went right for me. It just stood to reason. . . ."

"Smitty?"

"Yeah, uh, Justin?"

"I can't see too well. I'll need someone to help me around."

"Me?"

"You?"

"Why me?"

"You're my friend. I need someone to help evaluate whether I turn suicidal or not. I suspect that the human race combined with the motes will be stronger and more resilient than the ones who brought them here."

"Jeez. We're all gonna turn into mote carriers?"

"I don't really thing so, Smitty. Maybe the more empathetic people."

"And you want me to be . . . ?"

"My eyes, my spokesman and communications director."

"Gawd. I'll be famous. I'll be on every network, in every paper. I'll be a

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household word. I'll be famous. Me. Famous."

Justin Twosleeps nodded, dislodging motes. He was learning to ignore them already. "You will be world-renowned, Smitty." No more, he thought, no more living a Dr. Seuss existence. Thinking of the future, it occurred to him that perhaps their lives *would* be worthy of Dr. Seuss. "You will help prove my point."

"Point? What point? A message of some kind?"

"No. My point. A person's a person, no matter how small."

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Here is a very short and very finely crafted story from the author of several fine and bestselling novels, including JAWS 2, OVERBOARD!, and, most recently, KATAKI, published by McGraw-Hill.

Late Again

By Hank Searls

ON HIS LAST morning he burst from the cool cave of his communal garage into the hot Southern California glare and turned onto the six-lane highway past the condos, heading for the freeway, knowing that if he stayed in the feeder highway's right lane, he would gain ten, twelve cars before the light turned red, and even if he got caught by the light, he could peel the hot little RX-7 out in time to make the next one because the rotary engine, though it lacked torque on the low end, was still going to wax the asses off the Mercedes diesel and the Dodge van that were leading the pack and that would be corking the flow if they did get caught at the signal, so he whipped his head around to the right, not trusting rearview mirrors or even the one on the right wind-wing, and floored it as he fingertipped the tight, sensitive wheel, pulling into the right lane and downshifting, fifth to neutral for a shot of gas as the clutch came in, then smoothly into fourth and flooring it again, searching the side streets for the motorcycle cop with the handlebar mustache who lurked every morn-

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ing trying to catch some poor bastard just like him, late for work and trying to get on the freeway before it clogged completely (because a dozen cars you passed *now* could turn into fifty cars maybe and fifteen minutes if the 7:30 traffic from Laguna Niguel and San Clemente got onto the freeway in the meanwhile; Jesus, he'd been stalled on it once for half an hour just for taking an extra swallow of coffee, and once he'd awakened horny and banged Julia, and then Handlebar had pinched him: "Yes, Officer, I'm sorry," he'd squirmed, like a whimp, as he signed the ticket, and still been twenty minutes late and taken all kinds of shit from his supervisor), but this time Handlebar was nowhere in sight, and he made the light and squealed up the freeway on-ramp and into the slow lane, head swiveling left like a fighter pilot, outbluffing a semi and a VW and a Pontiac Trans-Am in the next three lanes to finally slide into the fast one, and switched on the radio for the traffic advisories on KMPC, the Extra-News Station, and Shultz was on about the Libyan thing and how the administration was doing all it could to defuse the situation commensurate with the National Interest, but the Soviets must be shown. . . . No Sigalerts.

But then this sudden immense flash in the khaki sky ahead over L.A., turning it sapphire blue like Julia's eyes, and taillights blossomed ahead like cherries on trees, and he jammed on his brakes as a dead-white disk appeared for a microsecond over the city and burst into a mushroom cloud.

"Shit!" he bellowed, before terror, fire, and shock wave, in that order, engulfed him. "Late again!"

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It's so hard to stop smoking, and impossible to keep on a diet, isn't it? Or is it? The inimitable Professor Duckworth once again lends his creative energies to solve a problem that haunts many of us, with curious and witty results.

Live It Up, Inc.

By Larry Eisenberg

DUCKWORTH WAS UNWONTEDLY cheery that morning. I eyed him with open loathing.

"How are the arteries this morning?" he asked merrily. "Open and unclogged? And the body weight? Are you tipping the beam at the norm for your age group?"

"Even under more congenial circumstances," I said acidly, "I would find talk of arteries and body weight in bad taste. But this morning of all mornings, it's a breach of the social contract."

"Touched a nerve, have I?" asked Duckworth.

"I can imagine what you're going through," he said. "I saw you overindulging at the Faculty Ball last night. You must have the daddy of all hangovers."

"If excruciating hypersensitivity to sounds and a heavy chinchilla coating on the tongue are true indicators, then you're right on target," I said bitterly.

"There's no use in getting mad at me," said Duckworth. "You were the

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one that mixed champagne, gin, and bourbon. And I also recall how you went through a platter of those exquisite little whipped cream tarts. But all that's neither here nor there. I'm here to save your life and make you rich at the same time."

"Don't tell me you've got some new dieting molecule?" I asked.

He winced as I knew he would. His experiences with his macromolecule had made him swear off all such activity.

"Let me tell you my story from the beginning," said Duckworth. "President Hinkle called me in last week. After a bit of preliminary chitchat about his latest awards, he showed me the savage slashes he's made in my research budget. I can't afford new equipment and I've barely enough funds to replace corroded Bunsen burners. So I've been giving serious thought to ways out of this morass, and I decided that my only salvation lay in plunging into a lucrative business venture."

"Business?" I cried. "Do you want to spoil that warm, vital, incorruptible nature of yours? Do you want to be entangled with problems of productivity, profit margins, leveraged buyouts, and other inventions of the devil?"

"Nothing quite so crass," said Duckworth. "I just want to apply the soothing balm of hard science to lessen the pains that afflict the average workingman."

"Such as?"

"Let me put it to you this way," said Duckworth. "Why are you continually monitoring your weight on your bathroom scale?"

"Fear," I said candidly. "I'm terrified of those chilling statistics that link being overweight to heart disease and other fatal disasters."

"Precisely," said Duckworth. "And you don't dare smoke for similar reasons. But you'd love to, wouldn't you?"

"Eat what I want to? And smoke tar-drenched, nicotine-enriched cigarettes? Holy cow, Duckworth. It would make life bearable."

Duckworth beamed.

"Suppose I were to tell you that you can do both. And to *excess.* All of this without any risk whatsoever. What would you say then?" asked Duckworth.

"Prostrate myself abjectly before you in total worship? Or perhaps you'd prefer that I become your personal manservant for life? Or maybe there's some other way, admittedly inadequate, to repay you for such a priceless boon?"

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Suiting action to the words, I attempted to plant a kiss on his acid-stained fingers. He tugged them away with a shudder of revulsion.

"Don't overdo it," he snarled. "For the moment you've made me reconsider my plan."

"Please?"

"Oh, all right. Here's the essence of my idea."

He strode over to one of his filing cabinets and withdrew a thick sheaf of technical reprints. He dropped them on the laboratory bench before me.

"I've done a considerable computer search of the literature," he said. "I've pulled together a load of data that proves that certain levels of overeating and smoking can be safely tolerated. Provided, of course, that you stop both at a certain point. If you do, you slot right back into the statistics of nonsmokers and people of normal weight after a relatively short period of time."

My brow furrowed.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "As I understand it, you are telling me that if I smoked two packs of unfiltered cigarettes every day for many years, and then stopped completely, I would soon have the same statistical expectancies as to heart disease and lung cancer as the nonsmoker has?"

"The conclusion is inescapable," said Duckworth. "My tables offer the proof in black and white. Naturally, the critical thing is *when* you stop. If you don't quit at the right time, you're a cooked goose. The trouble is that most people don't have the foggiest idea of where this critical point is. So they have no alternative, if they're sensible, but to give up smoking and embrace revoltingly Spartan eating habits."

"And how will you prevent this?"

"By setting up a file for the smoker and a file for the overeater. All this will be done on a subscription basis."

"I see," I cried. "And at the critical moment, you notify your subscriber that it's time to come off the primrose path."

"Precisely," said Duckworth. "There's more to it than that, of course. My actuarial tables will be supplemented by periodic blood and tissue cultures. After all, statistics give only average figures."

"But until *that* time," I exulted, "people like myself will be able to live it up with impunity. Duckworth, you'll go down in history as the savior of every spineless, weak-willed man and woman in the nation."

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Duckworth beamed and his tiny eyes filled ever so slightly. Clearly he was moved by my appreciation of his ever-flowering genius.

"How do you propose to finance this magnificent venture?" I asked.

His face clouded.

"That's the only fly in the ointment," he admitted. "I have a predatory brother-in-law who believes that the world was created for venture capital. He is only too eager to set up a stock-floating deal and to manage my proposed service."

"Is he the right man to make it a success?"

"Right man? His rapaciousness is exceeded only by his unvarnished greed, a combination that makes him a rattling good businessman, if a despicable human. But I thought it would be expedient to keep the thievery in the family."

"Very sensible," I said. "Please let me know when this stock will be on the market."

THE NEW corporation, LIVE IT UP, INC., proved to be an even greater bonanza than Duckworth's brother-in-law had expected. As soon as Duckworth's idea appeared in the press, the public was hooked. An immediate clamor for stock arose, and the market price of LIVE IT UP shot up by leaps and bounds. The fact that the subscriber service was run by Duckworth, a man who was twice a Nobel laureate, gave everyone complete confidence in the honesty of the venture. And when Duckworth announced that all of his shares (51 percent of the preferred stock) had been turned over to Merriweather University's chemistry department, the value of the shares leaped another ten points.

By being in on the ground floor, I had reaped a tidy profit for myself. Needless to say, I was also a subscriber to the services of LIVE IT UP, INC., as were many of my university colleagues. Only my wife remained skeptical.

Although her jaws were slavering as I wolfed napoleons, custard tarts, and lacy chocolate mousses, she stubbornly insisted that I was trying to get something for nothing.

"Somewhere and someplace there will be a paying of the piper," she said.

"Do you know what your trouble is?" I asked indignantly. "You're suffering from the old moribund Protestant ethic. You think that anything that's enjoyable is bad for you. Well, wake up. We're starting the twenty-

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first century. We've shed those medieval ideas."

And nose in the air, I waddled out of the room.

Actually there were some unexpected side effects that troubled me. My ballooning weight had caused a sharp tilt to our queen-sized bed so that my wife had developed the habit of sleeping on the living room couch. There was also a thick blue haze of smoke in the computer laboratory so that it was often impossible to see the keys of the console or even read the CRT monitor. Nevertheless, the limitless satisfactions and compensations were indescribably wonderful.

And then, one day, it happened. A COLD TURKEY registered letter arrived from LIVE IT UP, INC. It informed me that henceforth I must go on a total abstinence program with a rigorous dieting plan included. The very high cholesterol blood drained from my well-rounded cheeks, and I hastily telephoned the offices of LIVE IT UP, INC., to make certain that there was no mistake. My worst fears were confirmed, I went immediately to the basement freezer, withdrew vast quantities of frozen cheesecake, and dumped it in the trash bins. Cartons of high-tar cigarettes went the same route.

I cannot adequately describe the nightmarish quality of the weeks and months that followed. I became surly, ill-tempered, bitter, and impossible to please. I snarled my way through innumerable conferences and even gave the Grand Old Man, President Hinkle, the sharp edge of my tongue. He was so startled by this uncalled-for and uncharacteristic abuse that he did not bite my head off. Instead, tiny tears welled up in his red-veined eyes.

I had gone too far.

Duckworth called me in for a private, Dutch uncle talk.

"You may be a very valuable man to the university," he warned. "But don't push your luck. You're likely to find yourself walking the pavement without even a negative recommendation."

"Is that so?" I snarled. "What about my ironclad tenure?"

"Loathesome behavior offers adequate legal grounds for the breaching of tenure," said Duckworth.

I buried my face in my hands.

"What's happened to me, Duckworth?" I cried. "I was once a reasonably decent chap. Occasionally I might be nasty, but sometimes I even smiled at babies and old ladies. Now I go around hurting people's feelings."

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Duckworth sighed.

"It's all my fault," he said. "You are the prototypical manifestation of the LIVE IT UP syndrome. I failed to take into account what would probably happen when people who had been living through unending sybaritic orgies were suddenly pulled back to the mundane, spare existence of the bad old days. In fact, some of my subscribers have refused to give up their high living and sealed their own doom. But most of the others, like yourself, become snarling misanthropes."

He looked deeply into my eyes.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked.

"Never," I said firmly. "It *is* your fault. And you've got to put all of your creative genius into finding a way out for us. You can't comprehend what it's like to cold-turkey on Bavarian cream pie addiction. And I find myself eyeing sodden cigarette butts in overflowing ashtrays as though they were flawless diamonds. Help me, Duckworth," I cried, "please help me."

And to my extreme embarrassment, I found myself pummeling the cushions of his office couch with doubled fists while big fat tears squirted down my cheeks.

Duckworth comforted me, and I could see a look of determination in his tiny dark eyes that boded ill for this apparently unsolvable problem. He was not available for weeks despite my frequent calls. I became convinced that he had deserted me under fire. Desperate, I was on the verge of joining a whipped cream encounter group when he telephoned.

"Come to my lab at once," he said.

There was a world of confidence in his words.

"Are you telling me . . ."

"Your troubles are over," he interrupted.

I ran, tumbling and stumbling through the smoke-filled corridors until, out of breath, I fell into Duckworth's office. His tousled head was thrust forward and he was peering at what looked to me like a peculiar convoluted baby pacifier. It was connected by cable to a compact FM tape recorder that was lying on his desk.

"What on earth is that ungodly thing?" I asked.

"Don't ask silly questions. Just insert this pacifier into your mouth and over your tongue."

With gentle fingers, he showed me how to guide the contraption into my mouth and position it so that there was no danger of my strangling. He

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then went to his refrigerator and withdrew a platter.

"I want you to eat all of this," he insisted. "You may have a bit of trouble getting it past the pacifier. But if you take it in small bits, you'll manage."

"Bavarian cream pie? Please old chum, don't be cruel. If you only knew how hard my struggle has been."

"Eat it," commanded Duckworth, showing no mercy.

I broke off small pieces and, despite the encumbrance of the pacifier, managed to get it into my throat. The exquisite sensation was almost more than I could bear. Then I noticed that Duckworth had turned on the FM tape recorder.

"What are you doing?" I mumbled, sounding like I did when in my dentist's chair.

"I'm recording nerve potentials from your taste receptors," he said quietly. "That elaborate, ingeniously constructed pacifier is actually a recording electrode. It can stimulate, too."

My eyes lit up.

"Duckworth!" I cried. "You are truly a genius! You're recording my nerve potentials so that whenever I crave sweets, I can play the tape and stimulate my taste receptors in the proper time sequence. It will give me all of the exquisite pleasure of gluttony without having to eat a single morsel."

"That's it," he admitted. "And if my analysis is correct, it will work equally well for cigarettes. So lean back and enjoy this live array of cream pastry while you can."

I did so, and perhaps because it *was* my last live eating orgy, it was all the more precious. When it was over and I had emitted a luxuriant sigh of contentment, a provocative thought struck me.

"Can you do this for sex?"

"Ingrate," said Duckworth. "Stick to the taste buds of your tongue."

And thereafter, but with some reluctance, I did.

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Ben Bova's latest story is a not entirely serious boardroom drama that takes place in a future so serene that crises must be manufactured by a small group that controls the entire media of North America . . .

Crisis of the Month

By Ben Bova

WHILE I CRUMPLED the paper note that someone had slipped into my jacket pocket, Jack Armstrong drummed his fingers on the immaculately gleaming expanse of the pseudomahogany conference table.

"Well, he said, testily, "Ladies and gentlemen, don't *one* of you have a possibility? An inkling? An idea?"

No one spoke. I left the wadded note in my pocket and placed both my hands conspicuously on the table top. Armstrong drummed away in abysmal silence. I guess once he had actually looked like The All-American Boy. Now, many facelifts and body remodelings later, he looked more like a moderately well-preserved wax dummy.

"Nothing at all, gentlemen and ladies?" He always made certain to give each sex the first position fifty percent of the time. Affirmative action was a way of life with our Boss.

"Very well then. We will Delphi the problem."

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That broke the silence. Everyone groaned.

"There's nothing else to be done," the Boss insisted. "We *must* have a crisis by Monday morning. It is now . . ." he glanced at the digital readout built into the table top, ". . . three-eighteen p.m. Friday. We will not leave this office until we have a crisis to offer."

We knew it wouldn't do a bit of good, but we groaned all over again.

The Crisis Command Center was the best-kept secret in the world. No government knew of our existence. Nor did the people, of course. In fact, in all the world's far-flung news media, only a select handful of the top-most executives knew of the CCC. Those few, those precious few, that band of brothers and sisters — they were our customers. The reason for our being. They paid handsomely. And they protected the secret of our work even from their own news staffs.

Our job, our sacred duty, was to select the crisis that would be the focus of worldwide media attention for the coming month. Nothing more. Nothing less.

In the old days, when every network, newspaper, magazine, news service, or independent station picked out its own crisis, things were always in a jumble. Sure, they would tend to focus on one or two sure-fire headliner-makers: a nuclear powerplant disaster or the fear of one, a new disease like AIDS or Chinese Rot, a war, terrorism, things like that.

The problem was, there were so many crises springing up all the time, so many threats and threats of threats, so much blood and fire and terror, that people stopped paying attention. The news scared the livers out of them. Sales of newspapers and magazines plunged toward zero. Audiences for news shows, even the revered network evening shows, likewise plummeted.

It was Jack Armstrong — a much younger, more handsome and vigorous All-American Boy — who came up with the idea of the Crisis Command Center. Like all great ideas, it was basically simple:

Pick one crisis each month and play it for all it's worth. Everywhere. In all the media. Make it scary enough to keep people listening, but not so terrifying that they'll run away and hide.

And it worked! Worked to the point where the CCC (or Cee-Dubed, as some of our analysts styled it) was truly the command center for all the media of North America. And thereby, of course, the whole world.

But on this particular Friday afternoon, we were stumped. And I had

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that terrifying note crumpled in my pocket. A handwritten note, on paper, no less. Not an electronic communication, but a secret, private, dangerously seditious note, meant for me and me alone, surreptitiously slipped into my jacket pocket.

"Make big $$$," it scrawled. "Tell all to Feds."

I clasped my hands to keep them from trembling and wondered who, out of the fourteen men and women sitting around the table, had slipped that bomb to me.

Boss Jack started the Delphi procedure by going down the table, asking each of us board members in turn for the latest news in her or his area of expertise.

He started with the man sitting at his immediate right, Matt Dillon. That wasn't the name he had been born with, naturally; his original name had been Oliver Wolchinsky. But in our select little group, once you earn your spurs (no pun intended) you are entitled to a "power name," a name that shows you are a person of rank and consequence. Most power names were chosen, of course, from famous media characters.

Matt Dillon didn't look like the marshal of Dodge City. Or even the one-time teen screen idol. He was short, pudgy, bald, with bad skin and an irritable temper. He looked, actually, exactly as you would expect an Oliver Wolchinsky to look.

But when Jack Armstrong said, "We shall begin with you," he added, "Matthew."

Matt Dillon was the CCC expert on energy problems. He always got to his feet when he had something to say. This time he remained with his round rump resting resignedly on the caramel cushion of his chair.

"The outlook is bleak," said Matt Dillon. "Sales of the new space-manufactured solar cells are still climbing. Individual homes, apartment buildings, condos, factories — everybody's plastering their roofs with them and generating their own electricity. No pollution, no radiation, nothing for us to latch onto. They don't even make noise!"

"Ah," intoned our All-American Boy, "but they must be ruining business for electric utility companies. Why not a crisis there?" He gestured hypnotically, and put on an expression of Ratheresque somberness, intoning, "Tonight we will look at the plight of the electrical utilities, men and women who have been discarded in the stampede for cheap energy."

"Trampled," a voice from down the table suggested.

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"Ah, yes. Instead of discarded. Thank you." Boss Jack was never one to discharge creative criticism.

But Marshall Matt mewed, "The electric utility companies are doing just fine; they invested in the solar cell development back in '95. They saw the handwriting in the sky."

A collective sigh of disappointment went around the table.

Not one to give up easily, our Mr. Armstrong suggested, "What about the oil producers, then? The coal miners?"

"The last coal miner retired on full pension in '98," replied Matt dolefully. "The mines were fully automated by then. Nobody cares if robots are thrown out of work; they just get reprogrammed and moved into another industry. Most of the coal robots are picking fruit in Florida now."

"But the Texas oil and gas. . . ."

Matt headed him off at that pass. "Petroleum prices are steady. They sell the stuff to plastics manufacturers, mostly. Natural gas is the world's major heating fuel. It's clean, abundant and cheap."

Gloom descended on our conference table.

It deepened as Boss Jack went from one of our experts to the next.

Terrorism had virtually vanished in the booming world economy.

Political scandals were depressingly rare: with computers replacing most bureaucrats there was less cheating going on in government, and *far* fewer leaks to the media.

The space program was so successful that no less than seven governments of space-faring nations — including our own dear Uncle Sam — had declared dividends for their citizens and a tax amnesty for the year.

Population growth was nicely levelling off. Inflation was minimal. Unemployment was a thing of the past, with an increasingly roboticized workforce encouraging humans to invest in robots, accept early retirement, and live off the productivity of their machines.

The closest thing to a crisis in *that* area was a street brawl in Leningrad between two retired Russian factory workers — aged thirty and thirty-two — who both wanted to buy the very same robot. Potatoes that were much too small for our purposes.

There hadn't been a war since the International Peacekeeping Force had prevented Fiji from attacking Tonga, nearly twelve years ago.

Toxic wastes, in a few remote regions of the world where they still could be found, were being gobbled up by genetically-altered bugs (dubbed

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Rifkins, for some obscure reason) that happily died once they had finished their chore and dissolved into harmless water, carbon dioxide, and ammonia compounds. In some parts of the world the natives had started laundry and cleaning establishments on the sites of the former toxic waste dumps.

I watched and listened in tightening terror as the fickle finger of fate made its way down the table toward me. I was low man on the board, the newest person there, sitting at the end of the table between pert Ms. Mary Richards (sex and family relations were her specialty) and dumpy old Alexis Carrington-Colby (nutrition and diets — it was she who had, three months earlier, come up with the blockbuster of the "mother's milk" crisis).

I hoped that either Ms. Richards or Ms. Carrington-Colby would offer some shred of hope for the rest of the board to nibble on, because I knew I had nothing. Nothing except that damningly damaging note in my pocket. What if the Boss found out about it? Would he think I was a potential informer, a filandering fink to the feds?

With deadening despair I listened to flinty-eyed Alexis offer apologies instead of ideas. It was Mary Richards' turn next, and my heart began fluttering unselfishly. I liked her, I really was becoming quite enthusiastic about her, almost to the point of asking her romantic questions. I had never dated a sex specialist, or much of anyone, for that matter. Mary was special to me, and I wanted her to succeed.

She didn't. There was no crisis in sex or family relations.

"Mr. James," said the Boss, like a bell tolling for a funeral.

I wasn't entitled to a power name, since I had only recently been appointed to the board. My predecessor, Marcus Welby, had keeled over right at this conference table the previous month when he realized that there were no medical crises in sight. His heart broke, literally. It had been his fourth one, but this time the rescue team was just a shade too late to pull him through again.

Thomas K. James is hardly a power name. But it was the one my parents had bestowed on me, and I was determined not to disgrace it. And in particular, not to let anyone know that someone in this conference room thought I was corruptible.

"Mr. James," asked a nearly-weeping All-American Boy, "is there anything on the medical horizon — anything at all — that may be useful to us?"

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It was clear that Boss Armstrong did not suspect me of incipient treason. Nor did he expect me to solve his problem. I did not fail him in that expectation.

"Nothing worth raising an eyebrow over, sir, I regret to say." Remarkably, my voice stayed firm and steady, despite the dervishes dancing in my stomach.

"There are no new diseases," I went on, "and the old ones are still in rapid retreat. Genetic technicians can correct every identifiable malady in the zygotes, and children are born healthy for life." I cast a disparaging glance at Mr. Cosby, our black environmentalist, and added, "Pollution-related diseases are so close to zero that most disease centers around the world no longer take statistics on them."

The reason the elderly Jack was Boss was that he did not give up easily.

"Addiction!" he blurted, the idea apparently springing into his mind unexpectedly. "There must be a new drug on the horizon!"

The board members stirred in their chairs and looked hopeful. For a moment.

I burst their bauble. "Modern chemotherapy detoxifies the addict in about eleven minutes, as some of us know from first-hand experience." I made sure *not* to stare at Matt Dillon or Alexis Carrington-Colby, both of whom had fought bouts with alcohol and chocolate. "And, I must unhappily report, cybernetic neural programming is mandatory in every civilized nation in the world; once an addictive personality manifests itself, it can be reprogrammed quickly and painlessly."

The gloom around the table deepened into true depression, tinged with fear.

Jack Armstrong glanced at the miniature display screen discreetly set into the table top before him swiftly checking on his affirmative actions, then said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the situation grows more desperate with each blink of the clock. I suggest we take a five-minute break for R&R (he meant relief and refreshment) and then come back with some *new* ideas!"

He fairly roared out the last two words, shocking us all.

I repaired to my office — little more than a cubicle, actually, but it had a door that could be shut. I closed it carefully and hauled the unnerving note out of my pocket. Smoothing it on my desk top, I read it again. It still said:

"Make big **$$$**. Tell all to Feds."

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"I'm a spy, Tommy. I've been working for the Feds since I was a little girl. . . ."

I wadded it again and with trembling hands tossed it into the disposal can. It flashed silently into healthful ions.

"Are you going to do it?"

I wheeled around to see Mary Richards leaning against my door. She had entered my cubicle silently and closed the door behind her without a sound. At least, no sound I had heard, so intent was I on that menacing message.

"Do what?" Lord, my voice cracked like an early Henry Aldrich.

Mary Richards (nee Stephanie Quaid) was a better physical proximation to her power name than anyone of the board members, with the obvious exception of our revered Boss. She was the kind of female for whom the words cute, pert, and vivacious were created. But beneath those skin-deep qualities she had the ruthless drive and calculating intelligence of a sainted Mike Wallace. Had to. Nobody without same could make it to the CCC board. If that sounds self-congratulatory, so be it. A *real* Mary Richards, even a Lou Grant, would never get as far as the front door of the CCC.

"Tell all to the Feds," she replied sweetly.

The best thing I could think of was, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The note you just ionized."

"What note?"

"The note I put in your pocket just before the meeting started."

"You?" Until that moment I hadn't known I could hit high C.

Mary positively *slinked* across my cubicle and draped herself on my desk, showing plenty of leg through her slitted skirt. I gulped and slid my swivel chair into the corner.

"It's okay, there's no bugs operating in here. I cleared your office this morning."

"I could feel my eyes popping. "Who *are* you?"

Her smile was all teeth. "I'm a spy, Tommy. A plant. A deep agent. I've been working for the Feds since I was a little girl, rescued from the slums of Chicago by the Rehabilitation Corps from what would have undoubtedly been a life of gang violence and prostitution."

"And they planted you here?"

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"They planted me in Cable News when I was a fresh young thing just off the Rehab Farm. It's taken me eleven years to work my way up to the CCC. We always suspected some organization like this was manipulating the news, but we never had the proof. . . ."

"Manipulating!" I was shocked at the word. "We don't *manipulate*."

"Oh?" She seemed amused at my rightful ire. "Then what do you do?"

"We select. We focus. We manage the news for the benefit of the public."

"In my book, Tommy old pal, that is manipulation. And it's illegal."

"It's . . . out of the ordinary channels," I granted.

Mary shook her pretty chestnut-brown tresses. "It's a violation of FCC regulations, it makes a mockery of the anti-trust laws, to say nothing of the SEC, OSHA, ICC, WARK and half a dozen other regulatory agencies."

"So you're going to blow the whistle on us."

She straightened up and sat on the edge of my desk. "I can't do that, Tommy. I'm a government agent. An *agent provocateur*, I'm sure Mr. Armstrong's lawyers will call me."

"Then, what. . . ."

"You can blow the whistle," she said smilingly. "You're a faithful employee. Your testimony would stand up in court."

"Destroy," I spread my arms in righteous indignation, "all this?"

"It's illegal as hell, Tom," said Mary. "Besides, the rewards for being a good citizen can be very great. Lifetime pension. Twice what you're making here. Uncle Sam is very generous, you know. We'll fix you up with a new identity. We'll move you to wherever you want to live: Samoa, Santa Barbara, St. Thomas, even Schenectady. You could live like a retired financier."

I had to admit, "That is . . . generous."

"And," she added, shyly lowering her eyes, "of course I'll have to retire too, once the publicity of the trial blows my cover. I won't have the same kind of super pension that you'll get, but maybe. . . ."

My throat went dry.

Before I could respond, though, the air-raid siren went off, signalling that the meeting was reconvening.

I got up from my chair, but Mary stepped between me and the door.

"What's your answer, Thomas?" she asked, resting her lovely hands on my lapels.

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"I . . ." gulping for air, ". . . don't know."

She kissed me lightly on the lips. "Think it over, Thomas dear. Think hard."

It wasn't my thoughts that were hardening. She left me standing in the cubicle, alone except for my swirling thoughts, spinning through my head like a tornado. I could hear the roaring in my ears. Or was that simply high blood pressure?

The siren howled again, and I bolted to the conference room and took my seat at the end of the table. Mary smiled at me and patted my knee, under the table.

"Very well," said Jack Armstrong, checking his display screen, "gentlemen and ladies. I have come to the conclusion that if we cannot find a crisis anywhere in the news," and he glared at us, as if he didn't believe there wasn't a crisis out there somewhere, probably right under our noses, "then we must *manufacture* a crisis."

I had expected that. So had most of the other board members, I could see. What went around the table was not surprise but resignation.

Cosby shook his head wearily, "We did that last month, and it was a real dud. The Anguish of Kindergarten. Audience response was a negative four-point-four. Negative!"

"Then we've got to be more creative!" snapped The All-American Boy.

I glanced at Mary. She was looking at me, smiling her sunniest smile, the one that could allegedly turn the world on. And the answer to the whole problem came to me with that blinding flash that marks true inspiration and minor epileptic fits.

This wasn't epilepsy. I jumped to my feet. "Mr. Armstrong! Fellow board members!"

"What is it, Mr. James?" Boss Jack replied, a hopeful glimmer in his eyes.

The words almost froze in my throat. I looked down at Mary, still turning our megawatts of smile at me, and nearly choked because my heart had jumped into my mouth.

But only figuratively. "Ladies and gentlemen," (I had kept track, too), "there is a spy among us from the Federal Regulatory Commissions."

A hideous gasp arose, as if they heard the tinkling bell of a leper.

"This is no time for levity, Mr. James," snapped the Boss. "On the other hand, if this is an attempt at shock therapy to stir the creative juices. . . ."

"It's *real*!" I insisted. Pointing at the smileless Mary Richards, I said,

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"This woman is a plant from the Feds. She solicited my cooperation. She tried to bribe me to blow the whistle on the CCC!"

They stared. They snarled. They hissed at Mary. She rose coolly from her chair, made a little bow, blew me a kiss, and left the conference room.

Armstrong was already on the intercom phone. "Have security detain her and get our legal staff to interrogate her. Do it *now!*"

Then the Boss got to his feet, way down there at the other end of the table, and fixed me with his steeliest gaze. He said not a word, but clapped his hands together, once, twice. . . .

And the entire board stood up for me and applauded. I felt myself blushing, but it felt good. Warming. My first real moment in the sun.

The moment ended too soon. We all sat down and the gloom began to gray over my sunshine once more.

"It's too bad, Mr. James, that you didn't find a solution to our problem rather than a petty government mole."

"Ah, but sir," I replied, savoring the opportunity for *le mot just*, "I have done exactly that."

"What?"

"You mean. . . ?"

"Are you saying that you've *done* it?"

I rose once more, without even glancing at the empty chair to my left.

"I have a crisis, sir," I announced quietly, humbly.

Not a word from any of them. They all leaned forward, expectantly, hopefully, yearningly.

"The very fact that we — the leading experts in the field — can find no crisis is *in itself* a crisis," I told them.

They sighed, as if a great work of art had suddenly been unveiled.

"Think of the crisis management teams all around the world who are idle! Think of the psychologists and therapists who stand ready to help their fellow man and woman, yet have nothing to do! Think of the vast teams of news reporters, camera persons, editors, producers, publishers, even golfers, the whole vast panoply of men and women who have dedicated their lives to bringing the latest crisis into the homes of every human being on this planet — with nothing more to do than report on sports and weather!"

They leaped to their feet and converged on me. They raised me to their shoulders and joyously carried me around the table, shouting praises.

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Deliriously happy, I thought to myself, I won't be at the foot of the table anymore. I'll move up. One day, I'll be at the *head* of the table, where The All-American Boy is now. He's getting old, burned out. I'll get there. I'll get there!

And I knew what my power name would be. I'd known it from the start, when I'd first been made the lowliest member of the board. I'd been saving it, waiting until the proper moment to make the change.

My power name would be different, daring. A name that bespoke true power, the ability to command, the vision to see far into the future. And it wouldn't even require changing my real name all that much. I savored the idea and rolled my power name through my mind again and again as they carried me around the table. Yes, it would work. It was *right.*

I would no longer be Thomas K. James. With the slightest, tiniest bit of manipulation my true self would stand revealed: James T. Kirk.

I was on my way.

CORRECTION

In "Ticket To Heaven" by John Shirley (December 1987), a printing error omitted three lines and caused the third paragraph on page 151 to be incomprehensible. The material should have read as follows;

Insects or acid rain or both. Oh. An explanation. It felt good to have an explanation for something like that. Even one that felt *wrong* when you really thought about it. So don't think about it, I told myself. . . .

The phone rang. It was Winslow. I didn't put him on-screen. I didn't want to see the white face and the black suit. "Mr. Thorpe," he said, "I just want you to know that if you want to tell me anything, anything at all, I will see to it that it'll be safe for you. With respect to prosecution."

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Bob Leman, whose specialty is the tale of evil and terror, outdoes himself in this new story. It takes place in a small American industrial city named Sturkeyville, an unlikely destination for an unspeakably alien and odious intruder . . .

The Time of the Worm

By Bob Leman

UP IN STURKEYVILLE, eight or ten years ago, there was a man named Harvey Lawson, whose wife was a worm.

That is meant quite literally: she was a reddish brown segmented worm about five feet long, with a chitinous exoskeleton, a myriad of short legs on her underside, and menacing, grinding mandibles at the front end. That was her true and permanent form. But during daylight hours — from sunrise to sunset, to be precise — she was able to assume the form of a woman, and it was in this guise that she appeared in public as Lawson's wife. The people of the community fully accepted her in that role, although they viewed her as an excessively eccentric person, and not at all likable.

The existence of such a creature in an American small industrial city is a phenomenon most people will find difficult to credit. There have always been rumors of such things in the steamier latitudes of the Far East, of course, but hardly within the boundaries of these United States. Thus, there was no way by which Lawson could have appealed for help to

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anyone at all without having himself certified as a lunatic. And in any case, he would have been unable to make such an appeal, because the worm kept very firm control of his mind, and would have punished him cruelly if he had even attempted to reveal the fact of her existence.

Before she became his wife, she was his mother. He could not remember his real mother at all, but he thought he could remember the time when she was suddenly not there — and instead, there was the imitation mother. He was small enough then to cry readily, and the first time the imitation came into his presence, he began to howl. That was when he first experienced the worm's power; his terror grew, and became total mindless panic, but he could make no sound. There was suddenly a vile presence in his mind, an infinitely disgusting intruder that wrested from him control of his body, so that his vocal cords were made lax and his mouth clamped shut. His despairing shrieks remained wholly internal. She did not like loud, continuous noises.

The real mother never came back, and the imitation mother remained. At first she did not look like the real mother, or even very much like a real woman, but in time and with practice she came to resemble a human being, and it is probable that to an outsider, she seemed to duplicate the real mother exactly. Little Harvey Lawson was never deceived, and he went in abject fear of her from that day onward.

His father was real, but he could not protect his son, any more than he could protect himself. The worm controlled him completely, and most of the time he was something other than the real father. But now and then the grip was loosened a bit and he could be himself for a while, and those were the times Harvey liked to remember; they were the closest thing to happiness in his memory. When he was small, he and his father simply sat and hugged each other until his father's face went slack and doughy and he put his son aside to obey a command from the worm. When he grew older, the two of them would talk for as long a time as she allowed.

We could run away, Papa.

I tried that. You can't remember, I suppose. She brought me back. And punished *you*. I — it was awful. I don't dare try anymore.

But what are going to do?

I don't know. Something. This can't go on. My poor little boy.

When he was fourteen, his father did something at last. He should have known — did know — better. But he was a man driven beyond human

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limits, and he no longer thought clearly; he forgot one day what he had kept in mind for all the years, that the punishment would fall upon his son if he tried to escape and failed. He forgot it, and took the boy and ran. And died.

They were in the car, on a road beyond the city limits, bound for a vegetable stand in the country where Wylie Lawson bought the root vegetables that were the worm's sustenance. She did not eat when she was in her human form, but in the night in her burrow, she gnawed ceaselessly at turnips and carrots and beets. Wylie Lawson believed that the vegetable stand was near the boundary of her power; several times he thought he had detected a weakness in her control as he approached the farm. And so, that day, instead of braking at the stand, he rashly pressed the accelerator to the floor.

It must be remembered that this man was tottering on the brink of insanity. He had seen his adored young wife killed and her place taken by an ineptly made simulacrum; he had felt the invasion of his mind by an intruding intelligence that he sensed as a smothering, fetid slime; he had watched with despairing horror his helpless obedience to the worm's commands; he had seen his little son growing up as a tortured puppet like himself, a waif without anything resembling a normal life; and he lived with the awful knowledge that there appeared to be nothing he could do. He lived with that for ten years, and he cracked, finally.

He pressed the accelerator to the floor, and the car leaped ahead, roaring. Young Harvey, half gleeful, half terrified, cried, "Pop? What you doing, Pop?"

"Getting out!" Wylie Lawson shouted. "We're going, Harvey! We're getting away from her!" While he was still speaking, the stinking slime clotted his mind, and his foot stamped on the brake. The car skidded to a halt, and the engine died.

But there was some basis for his belief that her power was weakened at this distance. By making an enormous effort, he was able to open the door and fall out of the car to the road and to say hoarsely to Harvey, "Get out, get out of the car. We'll run." He rose slowly and painfully to his feet. The worm's power was concentrated on him, and, for the moment, Harvey was almost free. He leaped out of the car and grabbed his father's arm. "Run, Pop," he bawled. The two of them moved with agonizing slowness down the road, away from the town, away from the house where the worm lived.

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For Wylie Lawson, every step was a major battle, an almost impossible defiance of the cold mind that controlled him. With clenched teeth and knotted fists, he compelled himself to move one dragging foot ahead of the other, to take one more step and another. Until his overburdened heart stopped, and he fell to the road, quite dead, free of the worm at last. They had moved about ten feet from the car.

The worm's mind, in all its ineffable nastiness, switched its influence to Harvey then, and he staggered and almost fell. He straightened, turned, and began to trudge back toward town, his face slack, his eyes blank. He had walked about two miles, when the state police car slowed behind him.

"Your name Lawson, son?" the trooper said.

Harvey did not stop, and did not turn to look at the car. He plodded along, steadily, oblivious to the car creeping beside him. The trooper said, "Come on, son, get in the car. We'll take you home. Your mother will need you." Harvey paid no attention. The trooper driving said, "Shock. He doesn't know what he's doing. You'd better get out and grab him."

The boy fought ferociously when the trooper wrapped his arms around him and lifted him off the ground; he was fourteen and big for his age, and the trooper was winded and bruised by the time he had forced Harvey into the backseat. "What's the matter with you, boy?" the trooper said. "We just want to take you home."

Harvey's blank face changed suddenly, and took on an expression of terror and desperation. He said in a strangled voice, "My mother is — was — help me. Will you help me?"

"Sure, son," the trooper said. "What can we do?" But the worm was in full control again, and Harvey's face was as blank as before. "Take me home, please," he said in a flat voice.

"Sure, son," the trooper said. They took him home, and that is when Harvey Lawson's decade of unmixed hell began.

He had already known the worm for ten years, of course. She had come when he was a little past four years old; had come and killed his mother and had taken his mother's place and kept it for ten awful years. But wretched as those years had been, his father was the chief puppet then, and the rein on the boy was comparatively light. He had never felt the full weight of her dominance until his father was dead.

He and his father had talked to each other, when it was permitted, about their lonely and hopeless martyrdom. In the latter years, Wylie

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Lawson's mind was cracking, and in his moments of comparative freedom, when he could talk to his son, he came to dwell obsessively upon the circumstances of the worm's arrival, to relive the grim event that began their damnation.

Wylie Lawson and his wife, both fresh from the university, had come to town because Wylie had been hired as a metallurgical engineer at the foundry. His work went well, and after his son was born, he bought a lot and built a house. A happier little family than this would be hard to find. They were good-looking young people, and sociable; they took to the town, and the town took to them. The old families — and especially the Hodges, who owned the foundry — accepted and petted them, and smoothed their path in a good many ways.

But it was a benefaction from the Hodges that opened the gate for the grisly misfortune that befell them. Will Hodge, the eldest brother and chairman of the board, took an avuncular interest in Wylie Lawson, and furthered Lawson's intention to build a house by selling him, at an extremely low price, a family-owned lot on Wetzel Avenue. The gift was not, however, altogether without calculation. The lot had for many years been unsalable, although it was a fine large one, and lay at an advantageous position in the town's best residential street. There was, as it happened, an amorphous ancient rumor abroad in the town, a vague shared sense that there was something wrong with that land, that it would probably be unlucky to build there.

But Lawson was a newcomer, and since the only people who had a prejudice against the land were those who had been brought up with the superstition, he happily built the house and moved his family in. The evil began about a year later.

It was an evening that had begun happily, as most evenings did in that house. Dinner had been eaten and small Harvey had been put to bed, and the Lawsons had exchanged signals that they used to promise each other that the best part of the evening was yet to come, after they were in bed. They sat down now to watch their new television set for an hour or two.

Annie Lawson stepped into the kitchen, perhaps for a glass of water, and a moment later, Wylie heard a strange sound, the choked-off beginning of a shriek; it was the last sound he was ever to hear from his wife. He sprang from his chair and leaped into the kitchen.

The worm was there. She had emerged from the doorway to the base-

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ment stairs, and had reared up the front three-quarters of her length, so that the baleful, faceted eyes were more than waist-high. Annie Lawson, her face frozen in an expression of terror, and her eyes blank, stood facing it. As Wylie burst through the doorway, she collapsed to the floor.

Lawson would have panicked if his wife had not been lying there helpless on the linoleum. As it was, he cast frantically for a weapon, saw nothing useful, and leaped at the worm bare-handed. Instantly something loathesome plunged into his mind, and his leap degenerated into a boneless collapse upon the floor. He lay motionless beside Annie.

When he awoke, the invading presence was still in his mind, but only a wary residual fragment of it, an alert sentinel that conveyed to the worm what he was doing, and, to a considerable degree, what he was thinking. Never for the rest of his life was his mind free of this ugly informer, this parasitic alarm system that brought instant and terrifying punishment for any transgression of the worm's edicts. From that moment he was enslaved.

He discovered the power of the worm almost immediately after regaining consciousness. He pulled himself to his feet, trying to remember how he had come to be here on the kitchen floor, and then he remembered, and shouted "*Annie!*" and ran from room to room, downstairs and up (little Harvey was sleeping soundly), and into the basement (where he saw, low in the wall of the furnace room, a hole about two feet in diameter), and then back into the kitchen. He made little frightened noises as he ran.

"Police," he said aloud. "Call the police." He picked up the telephone.

It was not something the worm could permit. There is, of course, no way of knowing how much she understood then of human words or institutions, but it was probably very little, and the probability is that she simply sensed that Lawson was seeking aid, and that it was his intention to disclose the fact of her existence. Whatever her comprehension, she struck hard at Lawson at the moment of his lifting the telephone, struck so hard that he was once more rendered unconscious.

This time he awoke to find his son standing beside him. The morning sun was shining through the windows. The boy said, "Why are you sleeping on the floor, Papa?" Lawson did not answer; he picked up his son and ran to the door. He jerked it open, darted into the yard, and made for the street. He managed about fifty feet before she stopped him. She had better control of her power now; he did not lose consciousness, but stopped,

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turned, and returned to the house, his movements stiff and unnatural, his face a lax, drooping mask.

It was in this way that he was introduced to the constraint that ruled the rest of his life. He was never to see his wife again, nor was he ever to see the worm in her own form, but the sentinel was permanently lodged in his mind, and when he failed to comply fully with commands, or attempted to disobey, he was punished. The noisome ooze would make its abrupt shocking incursion, coating and clotting his mind, engendering a frantic disgust and loathing, reducing him to a jerky marionette.

A modus vivendi of sorts came into being during the early days. The worm appeared to be profoundly ignorant of human ways and of the way the world works, but she was also enormously efficient in perceiving where danger lay and in devising means of self-protection. How intelligent she may have been — or even whether her mental processes can be classified in terms of intelligence — must be conjectural; but she was in permanent command of Wylie Lawson's mind, and she was able to read his emotions and to sense his intentions when they had to do with her, so that any attempt on his part even to begin a plan for escape met with instant repression. It would seem that she almost immediately perceived the importance to her own safety of ordinary behavior on Lawson's part, and she saw to it that he went to work each day, telling people that his wife was visiting a friend, and leaving the boy with a baby-sitter.

Sometimes during the worm's invasions of his mind, he had a sense that she was delving particularly into his memories of Annie, absorbing knowledge of his longing for her and his terrible grief, forcing him to picture her in great detail and to relive their life together. Such thoughts caused him unspeakable sorrow and pain; their fruit was the worm's simulacrum.

He had picked up Harvey at the baby-sitter's house and was in the kitchen heating their frozen dinners, when the door to the basement opened and he turned and with shattering surprise saw Annie standing there. Almost instantly he realized that it was not Annie at all, that it was not even a person, that it was some sort of ghastly imitation of a human being, an artifact created by something that saw with eyes and failed to comprehend the subtle details and relationships that mark individuality of appearance. But he could see that it was intended to be Annie, and as he stared, he could not help comparing the imitation with Annie as she

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really had been, mentally correcting the features of the simulacrum as he did so; and as he watched, the face shifted and altered to conform to his corrections, so that, in a few minutes, a very close likeness stood before him.

A very close likeness, except that it remained blatently inhuman, an obvious imitation. Lawson was seized by a bottomless terror, and he opened his mouth to howl his fear, pushed at last over the edge. But he made no sound. The worm had seized control of his voice, and commanded silence.

The imitation spoke instead. It said, "How . . . voice? in an animal growl, and then the same words in a reedy treble. Wylie Lawson thought, *It's trying to say, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?" Oh my God, what's it going to do!* And the imitation said, in a voice that was now quite human, although nothing like Annie's, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?"

Of course it doesn't, he thought, remembering Annie's voice, and the imitation said again, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?" in a voice that sounded exactly right, and he thought he would vomit or faint. The imitation said, "Now I will be Annie every day. And every day I will be Annie better." He thought, *I guess it means practice makes perfect*, and Annie's voice said, "Yes. Practice makes perfect."

That day the worm became Wylie Lawson's wife and Harvey's mother, and remained so for ten years, until the day when Wylie made his attempt to escape and died on the asphalt. For the first few months, he put about the story that Annie was not well, and wanted no visitors or telephone calls; then the worm began to appear cautiously in public, which at first relieved the anxieties of the friends who had been gravely disturbed by her sudden disappearance, and then puzzled them. They noted that she had changed beyond belief; not in looks — she did not appear to have been ill at all — but in personality. The ready laugh, the mischievous wit, the affectionate concern — and indeed, everything that made her a lovable person — were gone. The new Annie was cold, distant, absentminded, slow to reply, without humor, a dull fish. There were very few who regretted that she no longer accepted invitations to evening functions, and to very few held during the day.

Every day, Wylie Lawson went to work at the foundry, and during the term, Harvey faithfully attended school. Neither of them was able to

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speak of their servitude, of course, and Wylie's fellow workers and Harvey's schoolmates came to think of them as very strange people. They had no friends; the father's old friends dropped away after repeated rebuffs, and the little boy had never had a friend in his life. They had only each other to cling to in the glossy split-level house that was ruled by the worm.

They shared a bedroom so that they could be together as much as possible, and because Wylie could not bring himself to sleep in the room he had shared with Annie. He moved a cot into Harvey's room, and that is where they talked when they could. There was not a great deal of talk, though; after sunset, when she was in her own form, she constantly rummaged through Wylie's mind as she gnawed roots in her burrow, and looted when she found something of interest. After a time it seemed to him that she must know everything he knew; not only facts, but all of his emotions and desires and fears — every memory, in fact. She certainly knew that concern for his son was the only thing that prevented his suicide. He had considered it often enough, and was sure he could pull it off, a spur-of-the-moment leap out of a high window or in front of a speeding car, accomplished before she could take control of his limbs. But fears for Harvey restrained him.

Hodge Brothers, Inc. took care of its own. When Wylie Lawson suddenly changed from an enthusiastic, industrious, ambitious young man to a time-serving drudge who watched the clock and was confused by anything outside his routine, his superiors were at first concerned and baffled, and then hortative and threatening, and at last resigned. They gave him a desk and a calculator and *in* and *out* baskets and a clerk's work — record keeping and paper shuffling of a mechanical and rote nature, useful but undemanding and not of major consequence. Year by year he became stranger: painfully thin, haggard, jumpy, and deeply depressed. He was unsociable in the extreme, and bitter. Bitter.

When she was in human form, the worm preferrred talk to mind reading as a means of communication and commandment. She would not or could not learn to read, and both Wylie and Harvey spent a great deal of time reading to her, and answering as best they could her questions about what they had read. She watched television, and had questions about what she had seen. She was exhaustingly thorough in pursuing matters that interested her, and in time, Wylie came to comprehend that the matters that interested her were things that related in some way to the con-

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trivance of a way of life for herself that would ensure her safety and maintain secrecy about her existence.

In the early days he sometimes tried to question her, to discover her provenance and aims, to learn whether he and Harvey were to be enslaved forever.

Where did you come from?

I Come from? Nowhere. From here.

Here? Where? This country? This planet? This house?

This house. Under this house.

How did you get there?

I One did not get there. One was there.

Always?

Yes. Perhaps no. Probably.

What are you?

I am [picture of herself in her real form].

Are there others like you?

Agitation. *That is enough. No more questions.*

There are others, then.

Stop. One is the only one. Stop.

And that was all. If he pursued that line, harsh punishment followed. And he had no better results when he pursued another track:

Why are you doing this to us?

One protects herself.

You were protected before you began all this, weren't you? Nobody even knew you were there.

It was necessary. It is a . . . . cycle.

What is necessary? That you take the place of a human being?

Yes. Now a human being. And you to protect me.

But for how long? Dear God, how long?

It is a cycle. It is necessary.

He never got beyond that point. He never learned any more than that, never had an explanation of the horror that had been visited upon him; he suffered through the weary, despondent years with no scrap of information to explain the worm and his enslavement to her. He suffered his vile bondage for a decade, and broke at last, and made his abortive run.

One of the troopers escorted Harvey to the door, rang the bell, and said,

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He existed for a moment in an emptiness like the space between the stars...

"Here's your boy, ma'am. Sure sorry about your husband. We've already called Hostetler to pick up the — we've called Hostetler. You can call him about the, uh, arrangements. Uh, good-bye, ma'am." They drove away.

Harvey went into the house, moving as stiffly as a clockwork doll. She closed the door and withdrew her grip on the boy's mind. He collapsed to the floor. After a few minutes he dragged himself to a chair and sat there, panting. The worm said, "Now we will talk. You must at this time take your father's place in protecting my concealment. There is money from insurance to maintain you and me. You will go to school as before, until you graduate. All must appear normal. And you must never so much as attempt to reveal my existence. If you do, I will know, and I will do *this*."

She had by now learned a good deal about the human mind and human feelings. Harvey was wrenched suddenly and horrifyingly into the blackest depths of suicidal depression; he existed for a moment in an emptiness like the space between the stars, a loneliness despairing and hopeless and drenched with regret and sorrow. It was, in fact, his usual state of mind carried to an extreme and almost ultimate pitch. It was much worse than any physical pain could have been. He knew with absolute certainty that he could not bear to repeat the experience. He said, "I'll do whatever you say." He almost said, "I'll be good, Mama."

And life, such as it was, went on, and the slow years crept by. The emaciated, tense youth, given to strange tics and twitches, attended all of his classes, apparently unmoved by the derision he inspired in his classmates. He attended classes, and went home the instant he was dismissed, and read to the worm or answered her questions until sundown, when she returned to her hole. Then he would force himself to eat something, and do his homework, and go to bed, where he was always long in falling asleep. He would lie there and brood, sodden with rage and despair and self-pity, desperately seeking a way out, almost ready to attempt the suicide that his father had rejected for his sake. And always, in a corner of his mind, he was aware of the sluggish coilings of the worm's sentinel, the unsleeping informer that was almost a part of his own mind by now, an oily throb that, sleeping or awake, was always with him.

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They lived in squalor. Harvey knew nothing about keeping a house, nor did the worm. The place stank. Dust and grime covered every surface. The kitchen was a welter of unclean utensils and molding scraps and the debris of an adolescent's feeding. The lawn was shaggy with weeds, the window's were grimed and smeared almost to the point of opacity, and a leak in the roof was suffered to enlarge itself. Appliances broke down and were not repaired. The carpets were greasy, and litter lay everywhere. Harvey's only baths were showers at school after physical education classes, and in the summer he did not bathe at all. He, too, stank. He knew it, but did not care.

After he was graduated from high school, he did not go to work, nor was there any possibility of going away to college. He was a hermit now, venturing out of his rancid dwelling only to shop for his food and the worm's roots. At the age of twenty-three, he was a very strange young man indeed, a seedy, malodorous scarecrow afflicted with a nervous speech impediment, odd muscular spasms, and paralyzing shyness. It was this unattractive specimen who somehow found, captured, and briefly displayed to the town a bride of such surpassing beauty that they believed he must have found her in the world of films and television.

She was, of course, the worm. She had summoned Harvey one day and said, "Now it is time. Your mother shall die, and in a little while you will have a wife. You should now call the" — she probed his mind for the word — "the undertaker. Say that your mother has died, and he is to come for the body and bury it."

Harvey stared at her, astonished. "Died — ? Bury — ? What? You mean *you*? You're going to die?"

"I have the body," the worm said. "I have carried it up. It is in the kitchen. Go and see it."

It was his mother's body. She lay on the kitchen floor on her back, arms at her sides, eyes closed, face and clothing yellowed by dust. Harvey stared, and shouted suddenly, "She's alive!" The body showed no signs of death, let alone the passage of ten years. There was a faint bloom on her cheeks under the dust, and her flesh appeared to be firm and healthy. She looked very young.

"She is dead," the worm said. "She has been dead for ten years. I have preserved her body."

"Why?" Harvey cried. "Why? Why bury her now?"

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"Call the undertaker," the worm said. The part of her that lived in Harvey's mind made its familiar move, and Harvey felt the uncoiling and the premonitory tingling. He made the call.

After the funeral he found the worm still in human form, still the hateful false mother. He said (and it was as close to a joke as he had come within his memory), "Are you still here? We buried you this morning."

"It is the last time," the worm said. "I shall now be someone else. You will have a wife."

"A wife? But if all you want is to be here, why wouldn't *that* do? Looking like — like you are now?"

"I will now go back to my hole," the worm said. "I must not be seen like this anymore. You will bring my food as always." And two months later she emerged as the television goddess.

This time she had needed no experimentation with the face and voice; she appeared fully formed, lovely, hauntingly soft-voiced. She was a composite of television actresses, and altogether beautiful. And altogether inhuman as well, but that was apparent only after a certain time in her presence, and her appearances outside the house were infrequent and brief.

The change made no difference whatever in Harvey's life. During the two months that she remained in her hole, the greasy coiling at the back of his mind was quite unchanged, and her commands, while somewhat less frequent than before, possessed all of the old authority. The new guise meant nothing at all to him. He did not see the young beauty other people saw, any more than he had seen his mother in the simulacrum. In fact, he seldom looked directly at her; she was there, she was always there, whether he was within eyeshot or not. Her loathesome presence was within him, and her physical form was irrelevant.

There were to be seven more years of it; seven years of a young man being robbed of his life, almost robbed of his humanity. When it ended at last, he had been in the worm's thrall for twenty-three of his twenty-seven years. He had never had a date with a girl, had never spent a night away from the ramshackle house, had never read a book for his own pleasure, had never had a friend. He had almost forgotten how to talk; he seldom saw anybody but the worm. It was a grim travesty of a life, and hopeless.

A day came when the worm said, "I will travel tomorrow. See that the car is ready to go."

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It was not an unprecedented command. From time to time he took her into town to buy an item of clothing, or to the grocery store and the vegetable stand to buy her roots. These excursions, he assumed, were to give an appearance of normality to their lives, to forestall any investigation that might ensue if too many people began to believe that the situation in the Lawson house was too strange to go unexamined. He said, "Pretty bad weather."

"See to the car," the worm said. He went to the garage and started the old car. It had been badly neglected. It made disquieting noises and belched black smoke — but it ran. Harvey sat shivering at the wheel until its noises smoothed and the smoke abated somewhat. He switched off and plodded through the snow back to the house. "*Real* bad weather," he said to the worm. There was no reply.

The next day it was still snowing heavily, and the wind was strong. The temperature, the television weatherman said, was twelve. Harvey said, "The tires are worn out, no tread left. We'll slide. And there's not going to be much visibility in this snow."

"Yes," said the worm. "I will wait to see if the snow stops."

It had not stopped by early afternoon. The worm said, "I can wait no longer. Go and start the car."

Harvey drove cautiously out into the white afternoon. "Where are we going?" he said.

"To the cemetery," the worm said. "To your mother's grave."

Harvey had thought himself to be by this time immune to any feelings other than resentment and rage and hate, but once more she had astonished him. He said, "I was there only once. I'm not sure I know the way."

"You will ask someone," the worm said.

He discovered that he did remember the route, which was in fact quite simple: straight out Donley Street and on up the crooked road to the cemetery, a distance of five or six miles. The car chattered and hiccuped and skidded at corners. It was bitterly cold. The heater produced only a breath of warm air, and gusts of the biting wind pushed at the car and jetted through pores in the rusty doors and body. Harvey's hands and feet felt numb against the wheel and pedals, and his teeth chattered. He looked at the worm, wondering if she minded the cold.

It took more than an hour to travel the few miles. Their way was generally downhill, and enough momentum was acquired, even at their

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slow pace, to see them over the short rises in their path. By the time he pulled up at the gate of the cemetery, the shivering Harvey could feel cold drops of sweat under his arms and on his palms.

The worm got out of the car and stood quite still for a moment; then she set off through the calf-deep snow at a confident and determined pace. Harvey, watching, saw that her path through the snow was perfectly straight, as though she knew exactly where she was going. She disappeared into the swirling snowfall. Harvey got out of the car and swung his arms and stamped his feet, trying to warm himself.

She was gone for almost an hour. She appeared suddenly out of the storm and took her seat on the passenger side. Snow lay on head and shoulders. *Go now. Quickly.* She was thinking at him, not talking. There was something different about the thought she sent, something new that he could not quite put his finger on. Weariness, perhaps. Or something like that. "Why did you come out here?" he said.

It was necessary. It was very important. Be silent. Hurry.

As it had been downhill coming, so was it uphill returning. The smooth tires slipped and whined and sometimes lost traction entirely. Then Harvey would cautiously reverse to a more or less level spot and charge the rise again. It was frustrating work, and hard on the nerves, and Harvey's permanent muttering rage turned for the moment against the road and the car. He had made two abortive essays at one of the steeper rises and had backed down for a third try, when the worm launched a command: *Hurry. Go to the top this time.* It was an imperative and urgent command, shaped to be painful and frightening. Harvey's rage rose to a red crescendo. "O.K., God damn it!.O.K., you stinking worm! Here we go!"

He pushed the accelerator to the floor; by some miracle the wheels found traction and moved them at a brisk clip toward the summit. At the three-quarters point, they began to slip. It was time to ease off, to gain traction by reducing the power, but Harvey was beyond thinking, and he did not lift his foot. The tires squealed in a rising pitch, and the rear of the car began to swing to the side. Harvey's foot did not move, and the engine's roar did not diminish. Ponderously and implacably the slide continued, until the car sat crosswise in the road.

It was at that point that the worm suddenly saw the danger. She instantly took command of Harvey's body with one of her full-scale, total invasions. His foot jerked off the accelerator and punched the brake. The

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engine died. The car began to slide slowly backward. The slide gained momentum, and there was a thump, and another, and both rear wheels settled into the ditch. Then there was silence.

Harvey sat motionless, paralyzed by revulsion and shock. Suddenly he jerked, and jerked again, and began to thrash about violently, venting an eerie howl. She had, in her urgency, loaded his mind with far more power than it was equipped to handle, and the compulsions she sent found their way to his muscles almost at random, so that what might have been a command to start the car was answered by a wildly flailing fist and a change in the pitch of the strange noise he was making. She perceived this, and withdrew entirely for a moment, and Harvey simply sat there, panting and sweating and sore. When she saw that he had regained his senses, she was instantly in his mind again, desperate, importunate: *We must go back to the house right away. It will be sunset in an hour. Get us out of this.*

Harvey went to the rear of the car, examined the position of the wheels in the ditch, and returned to say, "No use. I'll have to go for help."

No. No no no. You must get us out now.

"I tell you, it's no use. You're in my head. You can see it, can't you?"

Go, then. Quick. Quick. He could feel desperation — and perhaps — fear. It brought him a twinge of pleasure. I'll go as fast as I can," he said.

He wanted to go very slowly, to prolong her desperation for as long a time as possible, but she took command and forced him into his best sprint. Three or four inches had fallen since the last passage of the snowplow, and it was heavy going, especially for a sedentary junk-food glutton like Harvey. Before he had gone a quarter of a mile, his legs and lungs were capable of no more. He fell to the road, gasping and sobbing.

The worm raged in his mind, clearly afraid now. *Up! Up! Move! Move!* He began to crawl. Almost immediately she forced him to his feet and then to a run. He had covered only a few feet before he again collapsed, and was again forced to his feet and into a run. This time he fell almost immediately. His arms and legs did not stop moving, although for a little time the movement was random and purposeless. Then he was on his feet again.

And then he was crawling, and there was something blocking his way. He tried to push it aside, and could not. He blinked and shook his head to

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clear it, and tried to see what the obstruction was. It was a post. That was bad. He could not move a post. But he looked up and saw that the post was topped by a mailbox. A mailbox. There was a house here, then. They might have a tractor. In his mind the worm cried, *Hurry hurry.*

Moaning and whimpering, he reeled through the snow to the farmhouse door, and beat at it with his fist. As the door opened, he collapsed once more, this time deeply unconscious.

He came back to consciousness for a moment in the ambulance. The worm was thinking, *It is too late the sun is setting now I will die unless I find a warm place I cannot in my own form live in the cold now the sun is gone I will,* and Harvey slid back into the blessed darkness.

He awoke in the hospital, in a warm room, in a soft bed, beside which stood a pretty nurse. He said, "I — what happened?"

"You passed out last night at Detweiller's farm. Sam phoned for the ambulance."

"What's, uh, what's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, really. You fainted from exposure and exhaustion. And doctor says you're in very run-down condition. You're going to have to eat right, and get some exercise. But there's nothing really the matter with you. Doctor will be here around ten. I expect he'll discharge you." She went out.

Harvey felt well, very well indeed, almost high-spirited. But something was missing; somehow he didn't feel exactly like himself. Of course. Of course he didn't. Himself always felt rotten, and he felt good. Very good. Because—

Because the worm was not in his mind. My God, the worm was gone! The oily tickle, the viscid slow coiling that had been with him since he was four years old, was gone. Gone! She had gone away. Or — was it possible? — be dead. How glorious if she was dead!

He ate the wretched hospital breakfast with keen appetite, checked himself out of the hospital as soon as the doctor gave him leave, and walked to his house. He was astonished by its ruinous condition. He entered and was immediately struck by the filth, stench, and disorder. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror, and was chagrined by his disreputable appearance. It did not immediately occur to him that only yesterday all of these things had seemed quite normal. Now he simply luxuriated in his new freedom.

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But despite his glee over his liberation, full emotional acceptance of his deliverance was slow in coming, and as he made his tour of inspection of the house he was seeing as if for the first time, he found himself under a constant tension, a nervous anticipation of the worm's command or punishment. She was gone from his mind, all right, but was she already dead? That was what he had to make sure of.

He was unaccustomed to thinking out problems; he had never had to do so in his life. It took him some time to arrive at the conclusion that he could be sure only by going back to the car. And that gave rise to a further puzzle, how to get there. In due course he thought of a taxicab, and not too much later the cab deposited him at the place where his car sat canted in the ditch, pushed out of the road by the snowplow or its operator.

The car was empty. The door on the passenger side stood open, and a considerable amount of snow lay on the seat and floor. He walked around the car. No sign of her. On both sides of the road, the snow lay unmarked, but that signified nothing; she could have — probably had — left the car while the snow was still falling. Where would she have gone, then?

A line of trees stood a few hundred yards away, at the bottom of the long slope; it was as good a place to look as any. He plunged down the hillside and began to search among the trees.

The snow here was not as deep as elsewhere, and after a time he spied a drift that was suspiciously symmetrical. He dug into the snow, and his hands encountered something hard. He began to work frantically, furiously brushing the snow off what lay underneath.

It was the worm. Her reddish brown chitin seemed to burn through the covering of snow as he brushed through the last of it. Panic clawed at him, boiling nauseously into his throat, setting his limbs atremble, sapping his strength so that he was almost unable to remain standing. But he did not run; he stood his ground, holding his breath and staring at her. There was absolutely no movement. Dead, surely. He gritted his teeth, hooked his fingers under her, and lifted suddenly with all his strength.

She was unexpectedly light — indeed, almost weightless — and his pull lifted her clear and flipped her onto her back. He held himself ready to run — a hopeless aim, if she remained her old self — but there was neither movement nor any invasion of his mind. He forced himself to approach, step by hesitant step, until he stood over her, bending down with his face close.

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He saw an empty husk, an exoskeleton without contents. Dead! Dead, and eaten by animals, or rotted away, or decomposed by some unknown internal chemistry. Dead!

The long years of terror and frustration and resentful rage found expression at last. In a gleeful, mindless frenzy, he kicked the shell, and jumped on it, and beat on it with a club from a dead tree. It was thin and very brittle, perhaps from the cold, and it cracked and crunched and fell into small fragments, reddish brown shards that lay scattered on the snow. Dead!

And she stayed dead, although Harvey was frequently devastated by fits of sweaty panic that she would reappear. But as time went on without even a hint that she was anything but irrevocably dead, such visitations became rarer, and at last came only occasionally, in the dead of night, when she appeared in nightmares that frightenend him awake. When that occurred, he would rise and walk through the house, taking comfort in its neatness and cleanliness and its state of scrupulous maintenance. He would rap on the concrete plug that filled the hole in the furnace room wall, and examine his own carefully barbered visage in the mirror, and review the new clothes that hung in a systematic rank in the closet. Sometimes he took a shower and shaved. He was restored by this ritual to equanimity; he needed to contemplate the physical evidence of his changed life and new freedom.

His metamorphosis to a normal person had not been easy, nor would it ever be complete. The things that had been done to him were too awful and had been of too long duration and had started when he was too young. He would always be strange in many ways. He would never be easy with other people. nor they with him. He would never be able to talk fluently or think rigorously, and he was quite incapable of the sustained concentration that would be necessary to acquire an education. Nevertheless, he made considerable progress toward becoming an ordinary citizen. He found a job (Hodge Brothers, still patriarchal, found a timekeeper's slot for him) and tried to read self-help books. He took up bowling and became mildly fanatical about the maintenance of his lawn. He was a devotee of situation comedies on the television. He gamely tried to develop an interest in professional football.

He wanted very much to be normal, to be an average citizen. He wanted

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to put behind him, and forget utterly, the years of the worm. And while that could never happen, when he began to go to church (and he had never before been inside one), he discovered that even his first tentative gropings toward a faith enabled him to make a small beginning in exorcising his hideous past.

Another winter came and went. The nightmares were very rare now, and at work he had been given a raise. He was following a diet recommended in a book that had been recommended by its author on a talk show, and this regimen, in conjunction with the exercise entailed in working on his house and lawn, had greatly improved him physically. He was learning to smile occasionally. He had even begun, in a hesitant, tentative way, to pay court to a woman, a coworker at the foundry, a plain, tense, stray soul like himself. He saw her at church every Sunday, as well as at work, and he believed she would make a good wife. He thought of her plainness as a mark in her favor; the worm had prejudiced him against spectacular beauties.

They fell into the habit of lunching together on Sundays after church. They had come to feel somewhat at ease in each other's presence, and the more they talked, the more they found they had to say. Each wanted to know everything about this other, wonderful person.

Their talk turned one day to their parents. "Dead," Harvey said. "Both dead. That's why I live alone."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Have they been — gone — long?"

"Since I was seventeen," Harvey said. The actual facts were too complicated to explain now — and if he even tried to tell her about it, she'd think he was a loony.

"Are they buried here?" she asked. Harvey nodded. She said, "Do you take care of their graves? Keep the weeds pulled and all?"

It was something that had not occurred to Harvey, one of the gaps in his knowledge of how people lived. "No," he said. "No, I don't. I didn't know I ought to."

"Let's go out there next Saturday," she said. "It's not right to neglect their graves."

"Oh, yes," Harvey said, and he thought, I love her. She will teach me all the things I ought to know. She will make me normal.

They took with them clippers and trowels, a rake and a hoe, two potted plants, a sickle, and a picnic lunch. Harvey had no idea where the graves

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lay, but the cemetery was not large, and they found his father's grave after only a short search. This country graveyard boasted no paid caretaker, and the grave had not had any attention since it was filled twenty years before. It looked disheveled and forgotten, a tangle of dead weeds and live ones.

"Oh dear," she said. "Well, let's get to work."

It took a couple of hours to make the plot look respectable. They returned to the car then, and carried the picnic basket to a grassy place under trees, where they ate in the cool shade. A peaceful silence broken only by a birdsong prevailed there, and Harvey was suddenly washed by a wave of contentment and serenity, a sensation he could not remember ever having had in his life before. He said suddenly, "I love you. I do love you. Marry me. Would you marry me?" And she said, "Why, of course, Harvey," and they embraced, these two waifs who had, against the odds, found in each other someone to love.

There seemed to be a substantial number of things that had to be said without delay, and the sun was midway down the sky before they remembered that there was still work to do. They returned the picnic basket to the car and set off in search of his mother's grave.

Neither of the Lawsons had had any family in the town, and both had died young; there was no family plot, nor had any arrangement been made to bury them side by side. The graves were at a considerable remove from each other, at opposite corners of the cemetery, the mother's lying in a section that had been newly opened shortly before her burial. It was to this grave that the worm had come, on a snowy day, to activate the egg in the abdomen of the corpse.

But it was not precisely a corpse; there was a sluggish, glacially slow life there, preserved through all the years by the venom the worm had injected, preserved to furnish nourishment for the tiny, savagely toothed, soft thing that emerged from the egg and began voraciously to eat. And grow.

They went hand in hand from grave to grave in the soft June afternoon, reading headstones. After a time she said, "This is too slow. We'd better separate and each check a different section."

"Good idea," he said. Those were the last words anyone ever heard him speak.

She completed her check of the area she had selected, and looked back to see what progress Harvey was making. He was standing perfectly still, staring at a grave. She called, "Harvey? Have you found it?"

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He made no reply, no movement. She hurried to him, and as she arrived at his side, she glanced at the headstone. It was indeed the mother's grave. Then she looked at Harvey, and the horror began.

His face was doughy, blank. "Harvey?" she said, and then, panicky, "*Harvey!*"

There was no response, not even when she shouted, not even when she grasped and shook him, not even when she returned in terror to the car and drove into town for help.

They came with an ambulance and carried away the catatonic, this unfortunate man whose mind had been unable to bear the shock of the sudden, infinitely horrible and horribly familiar slow, oily uncoiling within him of an alien mind speaking from the grave. There was no escape, and it could not be borne. His consciousness retreated instantly and swiftly, going back, going deep into himself, diving and dwindling until it was a speck, a mote, deep in the darkest, nethermost recess of his mind. And there it would stay.

And a plain young woman, in effect widowed before she was married,

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went back to the gray, pointless life she had led before she and Harvey met, bitter now, and resentful about high hopes suddenly destroyed. She mourned Harvey as if he were dead — which, for all intents and purposes, he was — and she accepted as fact that her one opportunity for happiness had fled with Harvey's mind. She became in many ways more eccentric than ever.

One day in the following summer, she went to the cemetery with flowers for the graves of Harvey's parents, wishing (although she would not confront the thought) that Harvey lay there as well, so that she could put flowers on his grave. She laid the father's bouquet on the grave, and crossed among the monuments to the other plot. There she laid down the flowers and stood for a moment with her head bowed.

As she stood alone there in the summer silence, she started suddenly, and then became rigid as stone. Shockingly, without warning, her mind had been invaded by an irresistible power from the grave, and an alien, odious voice saying, *Now I will tell you what to do.*

The cycle would continue.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE RADIATION THAT WASN'T

THE LATE, great science fiction editor, John Campbell, was fascinated by all sort of fallacious devices that purported to do something in defiance of the well understood laws of nature.

One of these devices was the "Hieronymus machine," and the one thing I remember about it was that one stroked a surface while turning a dial. At certain settings of the dial, the surface was supposed to turn sticky.

I was visiting Campbell back in the 1950's, and he trotted out his Hieronymus machine; and, since I was a notorious skeptic, he insisted I try it and see for myself that it worked. I desperately didn't want to, but I was submitting a novel to him and I wanted him to take it and pay me several thousand dollars, so I didn't want to offend him.

I had to go through the motions, therefore. He turned the dial and I stroked. I earnestly tried to feel stickiness but there was none — absolutely none. In fact, as the palms of my hand grew moist with perspiration, because of my discomfort and nervousness, the surface began to feel not sticky, but slippery.

At that point, Campbell said, "Well, Isaac, did you detect a change just then?"

To which I replied, in hangdog fashion, "It just turned slippery, Mr. Campbell."

"Aha," said Campbell, with deep satisfaction, "negative stickiness."

He insisted that proved the worth of the machine. When I tried, rather diffidently, to bring up the matter of perspiration, Campbell dismissed it as irrelevant.*

Now Campbell was a formidably intelligent man, so what made him

*He bought my novel, by the way, though I don't suppose there was any direct connection between that and my having agreed to try the machine.

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act so foolishly? The only answer I could think of was that the drive to believe what one wants to believe can be so overpowering that it beats down everything else.

This can happen in serious science, too, and can produce annoying snarls. Nor need there be any question of funny stuff. Mistakes can be made by capable and utterly honest scientists entirely because of the Campbellesque will to believe.

In the late 1960's, for instance, an American physicist, Joseph Weber (b. 1919), reported the detection of gravitational waves. These waves must exist according to the general theory of relativity, and there seemed nothing wrong with the claim from the theoretical standpoint.

Nor did there seem to be anything wrong from the experimental standpoint. Weber was an able physicist and had set up very careful and elaborate devices to detect those waves.

The trouble was that no other physicist was able to detect the waves, no matter how carefully he duplicated Weber's work; and without such confirmation by others, a finding doesn't count.

But why was it that Weber could see what others couldn't? Again, the only explanation would seem to be that a scientist is human and, if he is very eager to make an important finding, and if that finding involves an observation that is just at the barest edge of sense perception, that scientist is liable, in all honesty, to see what he desperately wants to see.

The error was not, in this case, a dreadful one. Weber was on the right track, but his technique was not quite sensitive enough for the task. Physicists are busily engaged in devising more sensitive techniques, and some day, they are confident, gravitational waves will be indisputably detected.

Then there was the case of the American astronomer Percival Lowell (1855-1916), who saw canals on Mars through his telescope. He saw them in considerable detail, made careful drawings of his observations, wrote books on them, and placed the canals very firmly into half a century of science fiction stories. But, just the same, the canals did not exist.

Lowell was an honest man and a careful, hardworking astronomer, but he was trying to see things on Mars that were on the very edge of what could be seen. He was victimized partly by optical illusion and partly by the ardent desire to see what he thoroughly believed to be there.

Sometimes an observation falls apart at once, but not soon enough

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to keep me from committing myself to it in an essay and then finding myself forced to backtrack later. Thus, in the March 1986 issue of F & SF, I had published "Superstar," in which I discussed stars that were far more massive than it had been thought, till then, that stars could possibly be. Alas, even before the article appeared, astronomers (confound them) had changed their minds and had decided that superstars did not exist.

Earlier, in the June 1985 issue, I had published "The Rule of Numerous Small." Almost all that I said in that essay is correct, *but* I had been inspired to write it by the discovery of what was called a "brown dwarf," an object too small to shine by ordinary nuclear fusion but large enough to shine dimly by other processes. Naturally, it was assumed that there must be many brown dwarfs in the Universe.

However, the brown dwarf simply disappeared. Attempts to detect it where it had earlier been detected failed completely. What's more, a search for other possible brown dwarfs turned up none at all.

I repeat that I am not talking about fraudulent work by scientists who, for one reason or another, are lured out of the paths of rectitude. Such scientists exist but their crimes are not interesting, merely shameful.

I am talking about honest and skillful scientists, doing honest and skillful work, whose own all-too-human eagerness to find, and unwillingness to let go, lead them into error, embarrassment and, sometimes, into destroyed careers.

In this connection, there may be nothing sadder than the case of a French physicist named Rene Prosper Blondlot (1849-1930).

Blondlot was born, lived and died in Nancy, a provincial French town 280 kilometers (175 miles) due east of Paris. He was the son of a well known chemist and he himself taught physics at the local university.

He would probably have done much better if he had located himself in Paris, but he apparently loved the town of Nancy and made no attempt to leave it. Even so, he didn't do badly. He was a topflight experimentalist, and, for his work, he won three prestigious prizes from the Paris Academy of Sciences.

In 1875, for instance, a Scottish physicist, John Kerr (1824-1907), showed that glass and other substances could be made to exhibit double refraction in an intense electric field. This was called the "Kerr effect."

Blondlot set up a very ingenious and delicate experimental procedure that would measure the time it took for the double refraction to

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appear after the intense electric field had come into being. He showed that it appeared in less than 1/40,000 of a second.

He used a similar experimental technique to check the speed of the electrical impulse. By Maxwell's equations, it made sense to suppose that the electric impulse travelled at the speed of light, but it always helps to make an actual measurement.

Blondlot sent simultaneous electrical charges through two wires, one of which was 1800 meters (1.11 miles) longer than the other, and was able to show that the speed of propagation of an electrical impulse was very close to the speed of light.

In other words, Blondlot was a very good scientist.

But then, in 1895, the German physicist Wilhelm Konrad Roentgen (1845-1923) discovered X-rays (see "X Stands for Unknown" in the August 1982 F & SF). This initiated a rapid-fire series of discoveries that totally revolutionized physics, and, in 1901, Roentgen got the first Nobel Prize in physics.

The world of physics was dazzled by the prospect of new and hitherto unknown forms of radiation that offered a highway to scientific fame. It was not just X-rays. That had been preceded by the discovery of radio waves and cathode rays, and it was to be rapidly followed by the discovery of alpha rays, beta rays and gamma rays.

Almost every physicist in the world turned toward the study of these new radiations, but it seems to me that Blondlot had a special drive. This is only speculation on my part, but consider—

The town of Nancy, which it would seem Blondlot strongly loved, was the capital of Lorraine, which for a period of nearly a thousand years was an independent or semi-independent duchy. It was French in language and culture, but it did not become an integral part of the French kingdom till 1766.

In 1870, however, when Blondlot was 21, France was badly beaten by Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war. Prussia combined with other German-speaking regions to form the German empire, which became the strongest power in continental Europe. As part of the spoils of war, the German Empire forced France to cede to it a portion of its eastern territories called "Alsace-Lorraine."

Alsace was, indeed, to some extent a German-speaking province, but Lorraine was entirely French. To be sure, Germany took only eastern Lorraine, including the important city of Metz, and left western Lorraine, including Nancy, to France. Nevertheless, Nancy was now only 16 kilometers (10 miles) from the new German border.

For some forty years or more,

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France refused to be reconciled to the loss of the provinces. It viewed Germany with intense hostility and waited only for revenge (which it finally got in World War I at far too high a price). Surely, feelings must have run particularly high in Nancy, and Blondlot could not have been immune to them. He must have wanted, with all his heart, to match the work of the German scientist Roentgen and, if possible, to surpass him.

After the discovery of X-rays, the immediate controversy was over the nature of the new radiation. Were X-rays a wave form, or were they a stream of speeding particles? Either alternative might have been correct. Radio waves and visible light were clearly waves, while cathode rays, alpha rays and beta rays were streams of speeding particles.

All the particle streams then known consisted of particles that carried an electric charge, and these could be deflected if they passed through an electric field. If, however, the particles were moving *very* quickly, the deflection might be unnoticeably small.

Blondlot decided to tackle it from the other end. If X-rays were waves, they could be polarized when passing through an electric field and made to wave in one particular plane. This would be a phenomenon not shown by particles. The Kerr effect had involved polarization, so Blondlot used a detector made of two sharply-pointed wires with an electric spark leaping across the gap between them. He reasoned that if the spark were in the plane of polarization it would be more energetic and would brighten. If it brightened when it was placed in one direction but not in others then the X-rays were polarized and would be proved to be waves.

He tried the experiment, and it seemed to him that it worked. The spark appeared to brighten, and he felt that he had proved that X-rays were waves (which they indeed are, by the way).

But then something went wrong. When Blondlot passed the X-rays through a quartz prism, he had to change the orientation of his detector as though the plane of polarization had shifted. However, there seemed no reason to suppose that quartz would affect the plane of polarization of X-rays. Something was wrong.

But then Blondlot reasoned this way. *Something* was brightening the spark. If it wasn't X-rays, it had to be some other form of radiation that perhaps accompanied the X-rays but was completely different in nature.

Blondlot was taking a terrific chance here. When Roentgen discovered X-rays, he detected them by the fact that they made a certain

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chemical flouresce brightly. The difference between the absence and presence of X-rays was a difference between total darkness and a bright fluorescence. There was no chance of mistake.

What Blondlot was detecting, on the other hand, was a tiny further brightening of an already bright spark, a brightening that was not very noticeable at all. Blondlot *did* notice that brightening — there is no chance at all that he was faking — but he *wanted* to notice that brightening, and it was a case of honestly seeing what he wanted to see. Once he got the idea he had a new kind of radiation, he wanted to see brightening more than ever and so he saw it.

Unquestionably, Blondlot would ordinarily have been enough of a scientist to check the matter over and over until he was sure and to maintain an air of healthy skepticism till he considered the evidence certain. Undoubtedly, he would have tried to find a method of detection of the new radiation that would be reasonably certain. However, the excitement of doing what Roentgen had done, and of matching a German discovery with a possibly greater French discovery must have been too great for him. He was entirely too eager for the new radiation to be real.

To be sure, he did try to rely on something more than on simply gazing at the spark and deciding that it had or had not grown brighter.

Thus, he had the sharply pointed wires and the spark that flashed from one to the other enclosed in a cardboard box to keep out ordinary light. Beneath the spark was a piece of ground glass that diffused the light. Under the ground glass was a photographic plate that recorded the fuzzy light of the diffused spark. An alternative was to place a flourescent chemical underneath the ground glass.

This gave the illusion of removing the subjective nature of the determination, but that was only an illusion. The photographic plates and the fluorescent substance would, indeed, show a brightening that would not be influenced by subjective desire, but what brightening there was was still very small. And in the end, the human eye had to be called upon to decide whether one photograph showed a brighter fuzzy spot than another, or whether a fluorescent material glowed more brightly at one time or another. And the human eye might easily be victimized by a human brain that knew the answer it wanted and insisted on having it.

In 1903, Blondlot could wait no longer. He announced his discovery to the world. He had discovered

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In 1903, Blondlot could wait no longer. He announced his discovery to the world.

a new radiation totally different from anything of the sort that was already known and that might therefore open a new frontier of physics. He called the radiation "N-rays," and the N, as you can guess, stood for Nancy.

At once, other scientists, particularly Frenchmen who rejoiced in this French discovery, jumped on the bandwagon. They all began to set up detecting devices, to see small bits of brightening under this circumstance and that, and to determine new facts about N-rays.

For instance, what were the sources of the new radiation? Blondlot had first detected them in connection with his work on X-rays, which were produced by cathode-ray tubes, so *that* was an obvious source.

Heated metals and certain oxides, when heated, emitted them, since the spark was reported to have brightened when exposed to these substances. The Sun emitted N-rays, Blondlot reported. Others found that the human body was a source, whether it was living or dead, and that individual protein molecules were a source, too.

Almost everything was transparent to N-rays. To put it another way, N-rays could pass through almost everything. About the only substances that were opaque to N-rays were water and rock salt.

However, even when N-rays passed through certain substances, they might still be affected in some ways. Just as glass refracts light-rays, so do substances such as aluminum refract N-rays (it was reported). Blondlot devised lenses and prisms made out of aluminum. These would act to concentrate N-rays and make their effects more noticeable.

All this made such a splash that, in 1904, Blondlot received a prize of 50,000 francs for his work. It was for all his work, to be sure, and not for his discovery of N-rays specifically, although that was mentioned.

Of course, there were dissenting voices, particularly outside France where there were no patriotic reasons to support Blondlot's views. Physicists in Germany, Great Britain and the United States repeated Blondlot's experiments as closely as possible and reported being unable to detect any sign of N-rays. Two of those who couldn't were two topflight British physicists, Lord Kelvin (1824-1907) and William Crookes (1832-1919).

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Such disagreements did not dismay Blondlot and his fellow enthusiasts. Disagreements were, after all, to be expected, and they were easily explained by assuming that those who disagreed were doing the experiments improperly or were using inferior equipment.

(Responses of this sort were usual. When Lowell was busy mapping the canals of Mars, there were other astronomers who reported never being able to see the things. Lowell's confident response was that he had a better telescope and better viewing conditions.)

There was, however, an American physicist, Robert William Wood (1868-1955), who was a professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University and who specialized in optical work. He was interested in the new radiations, particularly in the mysterious N-rays. Eagerly, he tried to repeat Blondlot's work and failed totally. He got nothing and was both chagrined and disappointed.

Wood, feeling that he might have done something wrong, travelled to Nancy in 1904 (a far more onerous trip in those days than it would be now) in order to witness experiments as conducted by Blondlot himself. Blondlot was delighted to see him, was unreservedly cooperative, and willingly ran a whole series of experiments for the American's benefit.

For one thing, Blondlot said, if Wood were to place his hand in the path of the N-rays between the source and the spark, some of the N-rays would be stopped or scattered by his hand, and the spark would grow dimmer. (There was never any worry in those days about possible dangerous physiological effects of energetic radiation. People had to learn the hard way. Marie Curie herself died of radiation-induced leukemia.)

Wood placed his hand in the path of the N-rays, and Blondlot and his group immediately pointed out that the spark had grown dimmer. Wood could see absoutely no change, however, and said so. He was told that his eyes were insufficiently sensitive.

Wood then suggested that his hand be hidden and that he move it in and out of the path at regular intervals. The N-ray group could then tell him when the radiation was blocked and when it was unblocked by saying when the spark dimmed and when it brightened. Wood then put his hand into and out of the path, and the group kept calling out "Dimmer" and "Brighter." At no time, however, did the calls coincide correctly with the position of Wood's hand.

The Blondlot group then showed experiments in which the light was photographed with and without a

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piece of wet cardboard blocking the N-rays. Since water was opaque to N-rays, the photographs should be dimmer when the wet cardboard was in the way. When the wet cardboard half blocked the light, one side of the photograph should be brighter than the other.

Wood remained skeptical, however, for it seemed to him that, in a number of different ways, there was room for error and that the results were far from conclusive.

Then Blondlot performed a particularly complicated experiment. He had the N-rays fall on an aluminum prism that spread them out so that they fell on a strip of phosphorescent paint in four different places — as evidenced by the fact that, according to Blondlot, four spots on the strip were particularly bright. The conclusion was that the N-rays had been divided into four separate wavelengths.

Wood, however, could not for the life of him make out any sign of brighter areas on the phosphorescent strip.

So Wood decided to do something drastic. The experiment had to be conducted in a darkened room so that the phosphorescence would stand out better. In the darkness, then, Wood abstracted and pocketed the aluminum prism. He then asked that the experiment be repeated.

Since it was the aluminum prism that refracted and separated the N-rays into four different wavelengths, the absence of the prism ought to destroy the results of the experiment completely. Nevertheless, when the experiment was repeated *without* the prism, the Blondlot group reported the same four areas of brightness.

In another experiment, a large steel file was used as a source of N-rays. Wood managed to abstract that and substitute a similar piece of wood which was *not* supposed to be a source of N-rays.

Wood might have suspected fakery, but the obvious willingness of the Blondlot group to cooperate, their almost naive enthusiasm, and the very borderline nature of the observations, made it seem clear to him that it was all a matter of self-delusion.

Wood reported everything he had observed and done, and the whole business of N-rays was dropped at once — except in France.

Blondlot clung to N-rays. He tried to reply to Wood's criticisms. He devised new and better automatic procedures for measuring the level of light. He called on the support of other (French) scientists. For a while, the nationalistic tone became ugly. It came down, according to some French enthusiasts, to a matter of sensitivity. Anglo-Saxon

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and German eyesight was simply not as delicate and refined as French eyesight was.

But finally even French scientists turned against the hard core of N-ray enthusiasts at Nancy. In 1906, a French team of scientists devised an experiment. They prepared two wooden boxes of equal size, weight, shape and appearance. One contained a piece of tempered steel that was supposed to be an N-ray source that would pass through the wood, and the other piece of lead that was *not* an N-ray source. The boxes were sealed and secretly identified.

Blondlot was challenged to test, publicly, the two boxes for N-rays in any way he chose and to tell which one had the steel in it. Blondlot hesitated and then refused to subject himself to the test. With that the whole matter of N-rays died. It had been alive for three years.

Blondlot's scientific career was at an end. He lived out the remaining quarter-century of his life in obscurity. Perhaps he gained some satisfaction in living to witness the end of World War I and the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France. Since he died in 1930, at the age of 81, he was spared the disaster of 1940, when France was totally defeated by a resurgent Germany and lost Alsace-Lorraine a second time (but for only five years).

What are the lessons from all this?

First, scientists are human and can be driven by hopes and desires into error and folly.

Second, science is and should be international. The intrusion of patriotism and ideology can only be mischievous. Just as French patriotism powered the N-ray affair, at least in part; so did English patriotism power the Piltdown hoax. Again, Soviet ideology made Lysenko possible, while Anglo-Saxon ideology made Cyril Burt possible.

Third and most important of all, we see that science has a strong tendency to be self-correcting. Confirmation of all findings is required and is not easy to come by. Without confirmation, findings are thrown out.

What's more, if there is the faintest ground for suspecting a hoax, or incompetence, or even mere folly, scientific reputations and careers can be punctured or destroyed. There is no forgiveness for deliberate falsity, and very little forgiveness for foolishness.

Compare this with almost any other realm of human endeavor. We have all seen, in recent years, how figures in government, in industry, in finance, even in religion, can commit stupidities and even outright crimes, and admit to them, and be made heroes as a result.

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This does not happen in science. In science (and, I believe, in science alone), one cannot make up for stupidity and incompetence by cultivating a charming smile and a carefree wave of the hand.

"Tarzan no want computer."

Drawing by Woodman; © *1987 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.*

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Sean McMullen is new to F & SF although he has published a number of stories in his native Australia. He writes that he works as a systems programmer in the Australian Bureau of Meteorology and previously spent two years as a singer in the State Opera and several more years playing and singing in a number of bands. "The Colors of the Masters" is a story that involves all of his interests; it is a tale of computers, music, and the past.

The Colors of the Masters

By Sean McMullen

I FIRST HEARD CHOPIN perform the night that I had just been ordered to cancel my flight back to New York, along with the well-earned vacation that was to have followed it. Paris was reminding me how much I disliked the place by treating me to soaking, windswept drizzle as a taxi carried me to an address near the Parc Monceau. For the previous month I had been supervising the installation of some computerized sound-processing equipment in our company's local office, and I was tired, lonely, and aching to be in a country where most of the people willingly spoke English.

It was still early in the evening as the cab pulled into the drive of a mansion that probably dated from the early nineteenth century. There was a long, open path from the driveway to the porch of the house: the rain intensified at that very moment. I paid the fare, took my bags, and trudged down the gravel path, by now so despondent that I did not bother to avoid the puddles. Gerry Searle, my immediate superior in

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the company, met me at the door.

"I had a lot of nasty things to say to you until a minute ago, Gerry," I said as he took my dripping coat, "but just having someone to talk to in English makes me forgive you for quite a bit."

"Forgive me? For what?" There was no surprise in his voice.

"For giving me the Paris installation, instead of the one in Rome. You speak French, but my second language is Italian. My parents still live in Rome: I could have saved the company hotel bills. And did you know about the local autonomy dispute that's going on in the Paris office? The staff has boycotted speaking English, and I spoke only twenty words in French until a month ago."

"Rico, I know how the situation is here, but I just had to get you to take over," he said, trying to seem earnest but unable to face me." An important deal came up, a potential recording contract worth hundreds of millions. That's also why I asked you to delay your flight back to the States."

"*Ordered* me to delay my flight back. And why me? I'm one of the backroom boys. The only time that I ever set eyes on the musicians we record is when they appear on television."

I sat down heavily on a teak and velvet parlor stool and wiped my face with a handkerchief. A servant appeared from behind me, spoke to Gerry briefly, then carried my bags off. A servant. The furnishings also confirmed that this was not only the house of someone rich, but someone whose family had been rich for a long time. Very nice, but what would they want with a computer analyst specializing in digital-sound software?

"The recording has to be done in this house, Rico," Gerry explained as he beckoned me to follow him. "The musicians are very famous, but. . . ."

"But?" I asked, making no attempt to get up.

"They are dead. The people who own this house are distant relations of mine, and when I visited them, they—"

"They probably held a seance and conjured up Mozart's ghost, and you just happened to have a recording contract in your pocket!" I shouted, standing up and snatching my coat from the rack. "Send my bags after me. Company business, like hell! Bunch of wackos. Try to stop me, and I'll go to another outfit — I've had offers."

"Please, Rico, I can explain."

"Good. Phone me in New York, but try to get the time zones right or you'll get my answering machine."

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I turned to the door, only to be confronted by a pair of elderly identical twins. The women would have been in their early seventies, and were dressed in smart gray suits and frilly white blouses.

"We have mechanical recordings of Frédéric Chopin playing his own piano works," said the one on the right in confident English.

"We are not, ah, wackos," said the other, her voice and accent identical. "I am Claudine Vaud, and this is my sister, Charlotte."

"We are very respectable. We do not even know how to hold a seance," Charlotte stated indignantly.

I was taken back. "Edison got the prototype of his phonograph working in 1877," I replied. "Chopin died thirty years before that."

"Twenty-eight years," Charlotte smugly corrected me.

"But an ancestor of ours invented a way to record sound — except that she could not play it back," continued Claudine.

"But she could play it back as colors — we think."

"But Gerald has a way to change light back into sound, except that he is having trouble analyzing his digital signal."

"No, no, he was digitizing his analog signal."

"Ladies, please!" Gerry interrupted them. "Mr. Tosti is very tired, and has probably not had dinner. Could you tell the maid to prepare another place at the table, and we can explain the problem to him as we eat."

"All right, but you were not explaining it very well just now," said Charlotte as they left.

Gerry took me to the living room, where a coal fire was burning. The place was filled with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture, all tasteful, expensive, and well maintained.

"Tang dynasty," said Gerry as I examined a vase on the mantelpiece. "Everything in this house is genuine, Rico, including the music. The family goes back to the old aristocracy."

"So you have a bit of blue blood yourself?"

"Oh no. The family connection comes from Katherine Searle, who arrived from the U.S. in the 1820s and later married the heir. My own branch of the family is descended from her brother, who stayed in Boston and ran a factory."

He pointed to a row of portraits on the wall to my left.

"That one on the end is Hiram Searle. He was born in Boston in 1765,

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and is responsible for the basic principle of the sound-recording machine that you are about to see."

The artist had obviously taken some trouble to clean up his subject, but the dreamy, slightly scruffy appearance of the inventor showed through nevertheless.

"He was a great inventor, but had little business sense. Fortunately his wife was as sharp as a tack where money was concerned, and the family business did very well. When Katherine, the eldest daughter, showed musical talent, she was sent to Europe to get a better education. That's her, in the next painting."

Katherine Searle was a stunner, with black curly hair cascading down past her shoulders, a pale, thin face, and big, dark eyes. She was seated at the keyboard of a pianoforte, and was half turned to face the artist.

"She used to write long letters home, and sent a lot of the latest sheet music. That was probably where the big family scandal started, because, apart from being a good engineer, Hiram fancied himself as a musician, too. Our old family diaries describe how he would play the latest keyboard music that Katherine had enclosed, while his wife read the letters aloud to the rest of the family.

"In 1825 his wife died. His son was old enough to run the factory by then, but he could not control Hiram's obsession with Beethoven. He practically worshiped the man and his music, said that he embodied the spirit of the new century."

"In a way he did."

"Maybe, but anyway, Katherine had a lot of contacts in the musical world by then, and wrote home about Beethoven's deafness in great detail. To Hiram, it was the greatest tragedy imaginable. Here was a man who wrote music that was nothing short of divine, yet he could not hear it. Hiram decided to invent a machine that would allow The Master to hear again."

"An amplifier!" I exclaimed. "But it can't be done without transistors or valves: ear trumpets don't help much."

"That's right, and Hiram Searle was a good enough inventor to know when to give up on a futile line of thought. He decided to build a machine that would let you see the music you were playing instead. That's it over there."

I had not given the grand piano in the corner much attention until

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now. From a large rosewood box mounted over the keyboard, a length of cloth-covered electric cord trailed away to a mains socket. A screen in the box faced the player.

Gerry explained that the original light source had been a Davy carbon arc lamp driven by a voltaic pile — all fairly new technology in the America of the 1820s. The more modern filament bulb had been added when the mechanism was restored about a century later. He removed the cover, to reveal a complex system of fine rods and levers, all driven by thin metal diaphragms, and in turn moving a system of paper-thin mirrors and tiny lenses and prisms. Every moving part was mounted on jewel bearings. A frosted glass screen faced whoever was playing the piano.

"Of course, this is a modern Steinway," said Gerry as he showed me the metal horns that picked up the sound and delivered it to the diaphragms. "The original pianoforte is away being restored."

"That is right," said Charlotte as the twins entered. "It was strung with gut originally, but then metal strings were put in. They damaged the bridge and buckled the soundboard."

"It was the greater tension, but they couldn't get the gut, you know," Claudine added. Gerry had already explained that you could tell the twins apart by remembering that Charlotte always spoke first, and that she was the technical expert, while Claudine was the musician.

I was given a demonstration of the pianospectrum, as Hiram Searle had named it. Claudine sat at the keyboard, while Charlotte flicked a switch and adjusted some ivory dials. As Claudine began the Schubert Moment Musical in F Minor, the faint colored ripples on the screen from our voices became waves of alternating, blending colors, shaded according to the chords, and heightened in places by the melody. It was pleasing, and very relaxing to watch. After a time I looked at the movement of the mirrors and levers through the open access panel. How does one describe a device with no ancestors or descendants? It was all blurs and flashes, almost alien.

"The main innovation is the use of the metal diaphragm to change the sound waves into mechanical impulses," said Gerry. "Beams of white light from the source are split up by the prisms, then are redirected by the mirrors and lenses, which are moved by the levers from the diaphragms."

"For the early nineteenth century, it's sensational," I said sincerely. "What a pity he never got a chance to show it to Beethoven."

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Uneasy silence followed my words. The twins looked to each other, and then to Gerry. He cleared his throat uneasily, but said nothing.

"Oh, why not tell him?" said Claudine, speaking first for a change. "It all happened nearly 160 years ago."

"But what about poor Hiram's memory?" said Charlotte unhappily.

"If Gerald can turn those recordings into sound, the truth will have to be told."

"Very well," said Charlotte, sounding like a child expecting a beating. "Gerald, would you be so kind?" He nodded.

"Hiram Searle died in Vienna in 1827, a few weeks after he had arrived with his pianospectrum," said Gerry as he walked to a bookcase on the other side of the room. He took down two thick, leather-bound volumes. "I have here the bound collection of his letters, and Katherine's diary for 1827. Hiram wrote to Beethoven and promised to demonstrate to him a machine that would defeat his deafness. Beethoven replied, and was very enthusiastic. The trouble was that he expected something that would allow him to hear again. Hiram had not been clear about what his invention did."

"He did not like it," said Charlotte.

"He was very disappointed," said Claudine.

"He used a four-letter word."

"Except that it was in German, and was seven letters long."

"But in English it would have had four letters."

"But not in French."

"I'll just read Katherine's account of the demonstration," Gerry cut in hastily. I had begun to realize that the twins' dialogues with each other could last a long time under the right conditions. "The passage is not dated, but it is probably from the first week of January.

"'Yesterday's demonstration was the very worst of disasters. Herr Beethoven was very ill, being much troubled by a swelling of his abdomen. Father conveyed the pianospectrum mechanism to his residence at a very early hour of the morning, and we worked until noon to set up the machine on one of The Master's own pianos. The poor instrument was much out of tune, harshly voiced, and had five broken strings, all from The Master trying to beat an audible sound from it. It required a great deal of work from myself before its state could be called anything like well-tempered.

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'At last the mechanism and strings were as well adjusted as circumstances would permit. The Master entered, smiling but walking slowly, and obviously in discomfort. Father introduced him to me, but of course he could hear nothing. He sat down at the keyboard and peered at the screen of the pianospectrum.

'Father connected the voltaic pile to the lamp in the machine, then struck an arc between the carbon rods. The Master was puzzled by the fumes rising out of the little smokestack, and asked Father what it was. Father shook his head and pointed to the keyboard: The Master shrugged, then began to play a few chords at random.

'The pianospectrum displayed its colors on the screen perfectly, but this was obviously not what The Master had expected. He held his ear near the screen and played some more chords, then with his fist struck the box housing the delicate mechanism. Next he played the opening bars of the Albumblatt in A Minor, "Für Elise." Clearly the mechanism had been damaged by the blow, as no colors were displayed on the screen. He frowned, struck the box again, then began to swear at Father — something about bouncing, I believe.

"Now Father scribbled a note, explaining that all that the machine could do was to translate sound into colors. This sent The Master into as severe a rage as such a sick man could be capable of. He insulted Father terribly, calling him an incompetent ass; then he hit the pianospectrum again, stamped out of the room, and slammed the door behind him.

'Father was close to tears as he unclamped the pianospectrum from the piano. Although I was furious with The Master at the time, I do acknowledge that he is a very sick man, and that Father had not specified to him just what his machine would actually do. Today Father has gone hunting in the woods to calm himself. I cannot imagine what game he expects to find in the middle of winter.'

"The next entry is dated January 9," said Gerry, looking up for a moment.

'Father has been found at last, dead. In the opinion of the searchers, he might have been carrying a rifle carelessly when he tripped over a fallen branch, causing it to fatally wound him. In view of his trouble with The Master, however, suicide seems more likely. The authorities were very reluctant to certify the death accidental. Although I knew him to be an expert with guns, I told them that he was careless with them, and was

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always having accidents. May God protect his soul and forgive me for the lie. It was all I could do to protect his good name.'"

"Nine weeks later, Beethoven was dead," said Charlotte.

"Hiram's death was eventually certified as accidental, but there was still a scandal," said Claudine.

"Katherine moved to Paris, and changed her name."

"But she was already secretly in love with young Count Vaud, so she married him and changed her name again."

"It would have caused another scandal if people knew he had married the daughter of a suicide, so she concealed her background."

"She could never play the piano in public after that. She was so good that she would have become famous."

"Newspaper people would have traced her true identity, written about her in gossip columns, and drawn cruel cartoons."

"They would have said, How could she be a good musician when Beethoven called her father an ass?"

"She became a patron of great musicians and composers instead."

"She invited them home for dinners and parties."

"They played for her in this very room."

"Liszt, Chopin, Clara Schumann — she knew them all."

"Sometimes she secretly recorded their playing with another machine. Even in her diaries she never explained why she kept the harmonoscribe hidden from everyone."

At that moment the dinner gong rang through the rooms of the mansion, and the twins led us away to the dining room. My head was spinning from the revelations of the past half hour, especially the pianospectrum. It was a marvel of precision engineering, at least half a century before its time, but every step from this recording device was more marvelous still, I was to see.

Dinner would have been extremely formal had it not been for the circumstances. Gerry told me that he had begun the installation that I had been sent over to complete, and had decided to call on the Vaud sisters and tell them that they were distant relatives of his. This was on his second evening in Paris. He told them that he had been intrigued by Katherine Searle's apparent disappearance from the family correspondence after 1827, and after years of research had discovered whom she had mar-

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I stared in disbelief at the harmonoscribe as we entered the parlor.

ried. The twins were suspicious at first, but after deciding that Gerry was a decent young man, decided to tell him everything.

"Even after I saw the pianospectrum in action, I still thought it was great family history, but nothing more," he said between mouthfuls of food. "Then they showed me the harmonoscribe, and I knew that I had the find of the century, even without the playback machine."

"But what is the harmonoscribe?" I asked for perhaps the tenth time. "You say that it is meant to record music as color, yet you haven't even described it."

"Rico, you just have to see it for yourself. Ladies, would you please excuse us? It's time we got to work on that setup in the parlor."

"By all means," said Charlotte. "We shall have the coffee sent there."

"And we shall come ourselves," added Claudine.

If I marveled at the pianospectrum, I stared in disbelief at the harmonoscribe as we entered the parlor. Imagine a heavy mahogany spinning wheel with a circular silvered glass disk clamped to it. Rising directly out of the base was a tracking arm driven by a worm-gear mechanism, and mounted on the arm was a diaphragm to drive it. A long sound tube led away from the diaphragm to a metal horn that lay on the floor.

"We have set up a playback device of our own," began Gerry, but I stopped him.

"Wait, just slow down there. How does this thing record in the first place? There are no grooves on the disk."

"Not needed. The tracking mechanism moves the needle at the end of the arm as the disk turns, and it ends up tracing out a spiral path. At the same time, sound waves travel down the tube from the funnel and cause the diaphragm to vibrate. This moves the arm, and hence the needle vibrates as it travels, scratching a record of the sound waves in the silvering."

"It is all driven by clockwork," said Charlotte as she entered.

"And she kept it in the next room when she was recording the playing of a musician," said Claudine, who was right behind her.

"A trusted servant set it in motion at the right signal from her. The

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sound tube went through the wall and was hidden by a curtain."

"But why keep it a secret?" I asked. "It's a great invention."

"She never gave the reason in her diaries, but it must be obvious," said Charlotte. "Just imagine her showing the machine to, say, Wagner. He would wonder where she got the idea, and knowledge of science. Soon he would start making inquiries about her past. That would never do."

"No, and if it were Wagner, he would blackmail her for money."

"And sex."

"Nonsense. She was too old by the time she met him."

"She met Franz Liszt about the same time, and he tried to seduce her. It is in her diary."

"Liszt tried to seduce every woman he met."

"So did Wagner."

"Please! Ladies, I need to brief Rico on the technical problems we've been having," Gerry broke in.

His experiments had shown that the glass disks could hold a little over three minutes of recorded sound, and Charlotte had kept the mechanism in perfect operating condition. The playback device had been lost at the time of Katherine's death. According to her notes and diaries, she had been experimenting with a device that would reproduce the music as a color display, something like that of the pianospectrum. Because the layer of silvering on the glass was so thin, it could never be expected to drive a playback needle that could generate sound.

Gerry had adapted a modern turntable to hold the glass disks, and was using a laser scanning head to trace the path of the scratches in the silvering. When he had first seen the disks, he had realized that anything that was recorded in a systematic and orderly way could be scanned, digitized, and played back through a computer-driven sound synthesizer. This is where I came in. The software synthesizer's micro had been designed to filter out and enhance faint signals from old grooved disks and cylinders, not a flat trace on silvered glass.

When I asked for a microscope to examine the trace on the glass plate, the twins produced a century-old brass model that might have been contemporary with Louis Pasteur. I measured and sketched the waveforms, then began to modify the software.

"The problem is in the buffer masks," I explained as I worked. "At present it interprets everything as anomalous waveforms because it thinks

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it's getting output from a conventional grooved phonograph disk."

Gerry hovered nervously behind me as I began to change the software. While quite at home with rewiring and modifying even the most expensive hardware, he had a dread of tampering with working computer programs. He had fed the signal from the laser's pickup through a frequency analyzer before it reached the micro. The most substantial part of the change was altering several dozen assembly-language bit masks that defined the characteristics of the waveforms being input. It was the sort of tedious work that I hated, so I entrusted it to Gerry — he was so frightened of software that he would be far more meticulous than myself.

I had been working for over three hours without a break by then, and I sank into one of the large, comfortable armchairs as Charlotte poured my coffee into an eggshell china cup. For a while I stared at the mechanism that Katherine Searle had built so long ago. It was a magnificent achievement for its time, no less so than her father's pianospectrum.

"I wonder where she got the idea," I said aloud.

"Oh, we know that," said Charlotte. "She wrote it in her diary. She always kept a diary."

"The 1829 diary," said Claudine. "I'll fetch it at once."

"And the 1837 diary," Charlotte called after her. "That was the year that she got it working."

Claudine returned with the books and handed me one that was open for March 10, 1829. It was quite a long entry. Katherine had decided to repair the damage to the pianospectrum inflicted by Beethoven two years earlier. The part explaining how she got the idea for her recording machine was very explicit.

"'As I removed the lid from the box housing the levers and mirrors, I noticed that one of the levers had been knocked from its mounting, and had fallen against the worm gear of the clockwork regulator. This had caused the point to be dragged across the silvered surface of the large mirror that concentrated the light from the arc lamp.

"'The line was nearly straight for a short distance, then all fine waves and troughs, then straight again until the point reached the mirror's edge and stuck in the brass mounting. As a diaphragm had been attached to the other end of the lever, I concluded that it had been Herr Beethoven's playing that had caused the wavy line to be traced. It was there, on the surface of the mirror: the actual sounds he had produced, even though he was long dead.

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"'After examining the scratches with an enlarging glass, I spent the afternoon in thought. Could not these scratches be played back through the pianospectrum as colors? The compositions of a great composer are immortal on paper, but the playing of a musician dies with the flesh. Perhaps these little scratches could be used to record performances forever. There may even be a way to change them back into sound, or at least colors. If only Father were still alive. He had such a way with these problems.'"

"We still have that mirror," said Charlotte. "It is locked in a special case."

"There is a note inside, which reads, 'This scratch is the playing of Herr van Beethoven, January 1829,'" said Claudine.

"Here is the entry when she perfects the harmonoscribe," said Charlotte as she handed me the second diary. It was open at June 15, 1837.

"'I can now record short performances as scratches on a silvered disk,'" I read. "'There remains the problem of playing them back as either colors or sound, and sometimes I despair of ever finding a solution. I have tried using fine beams of colored light, directed in layers, but this provides a representation of the sound's volume alone, not its pitch. One might be able to mount a battery of small colored mirrors at the edge of a second disk, but I do not think that any watchmaker could fashion clockwork fine enough for this to work, and the image would be minute indeed. On the other hand, I know that my friend has a solution, and that I shall always be able to rely upon him.'"

"Who is this friend that she mentions?" I asked the twins. "Was he another inventor?"

"We do not know," said Charlotte.

"He is mentioned in the diaries from 1835 until the year that she died, but he is never identified," said Claudine.

"She died in 1875, you know."

"I think he was a secret lover."

"Nonsense. She mentions that it was always platonic in 1873."

"What about after that?"

"She was as old as we are."

"We could have affairs if we wished," Claudine concluded, turning to me. "What do you think. Mr. Tosti?"

I said that I had no doubt of it, then retreated to the micro to check

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the waveform mask that Gerry had completed. He returned to correcting the alignment on the laser head and pickup while I ran the modified program through some tests. I was wearing a pair of headphones as I worked so that I could monitor the output port. The A440 tone sounded clearly as I selected it from among the computer's data sets, and likewise that of middle C. Now I tried to test out some chords, but instead I heard a loud, crackling hiss, overlaid by a regular knocking and some softer rattles.

At once I realized that Gerry had managed to accidentally rename an output label, and that I was listening to a live signal from the laser head. I had put my hands up to the headphones to remove them, when I heard an unmistakable cough — the heavy, deep-chested cough of a dangerous medical condition. A man's voice said, "*Scusi, Madame.*"

As the music began, I had the impression that I was listening to a radio transmission from a very distant station — from another planet, even another star. Amid the background noise a violin played a dreamy little piece by Paganini. The player was very good, with a deft bow technique and an excellent sense of timing. The pianist followed the melody with discretion and sensitivity.

The instrument had to be a Stradivarius. I had learned the violin for several years, and had once been permitted to play one of the legendary instruments for a few minutes. I recognized the powerful G string and characteristic tone. The playing was excellent, the very finest that I have ever heard. Fear mingled with my admiration, an unreasoning fear that I did not understand. These people were deities of music, masterful and note-perfect. Even if I practiced for a lifetime, I could never play like this: in fact, nobody could surpass or even approach such playing.

The melody brightened into the major key as the piece ended. The man said, "*Merci, Madame,*" and she replied, "Oh *Monsieur.*" The hissing and rattle continued for a while, then stopped with a loud pop.

"I'm sure the tracking mechanism is as well tuned as it can be," said Gerry. I noticed that my hands were still raised to take the headphones off.

"Run it over that disk again," I said, unplugging the jack to the headphones and flicking the switch to the speakers. Gerry and the twins were as absolutely still and silent as I was while the music played again.

"'Number three: NP and KV, 1838,'" read Charlotte. "That will be Niccolò Paganini and Katherine Vaud, of course. He said *'scusi.'* He was Italian."

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"And he coughed. He was not very well," said Claudine. "He died two years after this was recorded. The theme is from Rossini's Mosè. Paganini's variations on it were very popular last century."

"Paganini himself," I whispered in awe.

"It's worth millions!" exclaimed Gerry. "A recording by the greatest violin virtuoso ever, and he's not even around to argue about royalties."

OVER THE ensuing hours we carried dozens of boxes of the silvered disks up from the basement. It was as if a group of children had dug up a treasure chest at the beach, and were strutting about wearing priceless crowns, tiaras, and necklaces before relinquishing it all to the adults. Katherine had secretly been recording the playing of her famous guests and protégés from the perfection of her harmonoscribe in 1837 until her death in 1875. Apart from the famous composers, there were quite a number of disks of famous virtuoso pianists of the early and middle nineteenth century. Singers and players of other instruments were on no more than 5 percent of the disks.

At first we played the disks of the most famous people. Clara Schumann's piano technique was flawlessly precise, yet with a warm grace that I have heard in no modern performer. Franz Liszt, on the other hand, played with such sparkle and excitement that I felt wrung out at the end of each disk. Chopin was a disappointment to me. Although he would hold his own with the top five pianists in the world today, I felt that the brooding melancholy of his style was probably more appealing to the nineteenth-century taste than ours.

As we played each disk, I made a tape recording — just in case someone dropped it later. At 4 A.M., Charlotte opened a rare and old bottle of French brandy, and we drank a toast to Katherine, Hiram, and the great musicians of the past century. We felt very close to them by then, as over the previous five hours we had heard snatches of their conversations, laughter, and occasional curses as well as their music.

"This will have to be marketed very carefully," Gerry told us. "And, of course, we will have to let scientists look over everything and test it for authenticity. I would estimate that your share would be about 200 million over five years, ladies."

"Is that in francs?" asked Claudine.

"American dollars. The classical-music market does not move as fast as

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that for pop music, but it is very big. Every music lover in the world will want at least one CD or record of selections from Katherine's glass disks."

"It is a lot of money, Gerald, and we are already rich enough," said Charlotte. "You worked out how to play sound from the disks, which we could never have done. You must have a share."

"Well, that's very kind of you, but the company will give me a big bonus."

"Nonsense, you must take the money," said Claudine. "And Mr. Tosti as well. He did . . . whatever he did to repair the computer."

"And he appreciates fine music."

"And he said that we still look seductive."

The twins winked at me in unison and smiled. Gerry gave me a puzzled glance as I blushed and hastily got up to put another glass disk on the turntable.

"I remember that English conductor telling me how seductive I was," continued Charlotte.

"That was in 1937," Claudine elaborated. "He seduced you, too."

"And you."

"Not until his next trip to Paris."

"He probably thought you were I."

"He did not. I was very careful to tell him."

While they continued to argue, Gerry left the room to phone our company's New York executives and tell them of our discovery. I had noticed that as we searched through the recordings for famous performers, we were weeding a large number of disks by Katherine herself into a separate pile.

It occurred to me that I had not yet heard her play alone. When she had been playing the accompaniment on the three Paganini disks, and during the duets with Brahms, she had given a very good account of herself. I selected a disk of her playing a piece from Robert Schumann's Woodland Scenes — "The Prophet Bird."

A professional concert pianist once told me that this piece is a nightmare to play properly, with its odd accents, timing, and variations of dynamic and texture. Katherine had either practiced the piece a great deal, or was so good that no effort was evident at all. The twins noticed, too, and stopped their bickering to listen.

"That is a new player, and a good one," declared Charlotte.

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"No, it was Madame Katherine; I remember some of her style from the duet she played with Brahms," Claudine corrected her.

"We must hear more."

"Yes, put on another disk, if you please."

We played Katherine's disks for the next forty minutes, and slowly discovered that she was at least the equal of Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt. A researcher like Clynes would say that she exploited the sensate forms of each piece to the fullest extent, so that the music was a strong emotional experience, rather than just entertainment. Months later a critic said that listening to her play the Chopin *Études* was like a firm yet gentle hand seizing one's heart while another stroked it.

I also discovered that she had modified the harmonoscribe in 1854, so that it could record for seven minutes continuously: this required me to drag Gerry away from the phone to adjust the tracking head to the double-density recordings.

While he tried to tell us how excited the folks in New York were at the prospect of releasing an album of Chopin playing Chopin, we tried to explain about how good Katherine's playing was. Whether she was outshining Liszt with his own showpiece compositions, or playing her own frothy but pleasant pieces, she had no peer, and we made our way through a selection of her disks until the clock struck 6 A.M., and the maid arrived to take our orders for breakfast.

"Will you be releasing only one album of her pieces?" asked Charlotte. "She has recorded enough for at least a dozen."

"We might get one of her recordings on the album of highlights of the collection, but she's an unknown, no matter how good she is," Gerry explained without concern.

"But she is so very good," insisted Charlotte.

"As good as the best of the great composers," added Claudine.

"And virtuosos."

"You don't understand the recording industry," said Gerry. "Most of the selling potential comes from name and reputation, not talent. And even talented players need expensive promotional campaigns, concert tours, media reviews, and all that. Katherine has been dead for over a century. We've never had to run a publicity campaign for a new, dead virtuoso before — it would be very expensive to run, and it could be a flop. She can't be there to pose for photographers, sign autographs, and speak for herself."

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"But she gave us all these recordings," I protested. "Don't you think we owe her something?"

"We owe her plenty, and she will get it — as the inventor of the first sound-recording machine," said Gerry. "That's real recognition, after all. Just think, only people who know anything about classical music will have heard of Clara Schumann, but literally everybody knows that Edison invented the phonograph."

"Except that Katherine was first," said Charlotte frostily.

"Well, let's be fair," I said. "She could only record, not play back."

"She did have a playback machine!" exclaimed Claudine. "She was always writing about the one developed by her friend."

"Whose name we never learned," said Charlotte. "Why, the playback invention may be somewhere in Paris at this very moment. We could run advertisements, asking people to search their attics and offering a reward."

The maid entered and announced breakfast. Charlotte and Claudine stood up at once, but Gerry stayed in his chair, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"I need to put a few more disks on tape for Rico to take to New York this morning," he explained, and I gave a silent cheer. "I think I'll pass up breakfast."

I volunteered to stay and help, and we set about taping another half dozen disks that Katherine had made in her later years. The last disk of all was dated only three weeks before her death, and was titled "To My Friend."

"Looks like another of her own compositions," said Gerry. "Put it on. We might be able to use it on the 'selections' album as well — you know, start with her accompanying Paganini and finish with her very last recording."

"Yes, the twins would be pleased if she was featured on two of the tracks," I said as I mounted the disk on the turntable.

The hiss, rattles, and knocking began as usual, but instead of playing the piano, the long-dead Katherine spoke — and spoke to us personally!

"*Monsieur, or Madame,* or perhaps there is even a group of you — you are the friend in my diaries, the inventor who has always given me hope, the person who has allowed my music to live again," she began, her voice weak and her breath shallow. She was speaking in English as well, perhaps anticipating that her disks and devices would be given to the American branch of the family one day.

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"My friend from the distant future, I hope that most of my glass disks have survived to entertain and enchant you. Although I could never play the music back myself, I have recorded the very best musicians who have visited me over the past four decades for the music lovers of the future. This fragment of my century's music is my gift to you, but I would ask a small favor in return.

"During my lifetime, and for the most cruel of reasons, I was unable to perform on stage or become a celebrity. When misfortune was at its very worst, I chanced upon this method of recording, and realized that I could use it to preserve my playing, as photographic plates preserve a person's likeness. A scandal surrounds my father's death, a scandal that I could never allow to be linked with my dear husband's noble family. By your century, however, that scandal will be either forgotten or unimportant, as time always heals such wounds. It will be safe for me to play in public.

"If you please, my friend, take your playback machine to the concert halls and let me play to audiences after so very long. I shall not disappoint them. My good colleague Frédéric Chopin always said that I played with the touch of an angel, and surely his opinion is not to be ignored.

"My doctor tells me that I have less than a month to live. Bless you, my friend, for bringing my hands back to life. Bless you and good-bye, from Countess Vaud, and from Katherine Searle."

She concluded the recording with a Chopin nocturne, No. 2 in E-flat Major, and you may blame it on my Mediterranean temperament if you like, but I found myself unable to hold back the tears. Gerry had been sitting on the edge of his chair while the disk played, but he slumped back and buried his face with his hands as the last chord faded into the background of hiss and rattles.

"So the friend was us," I said rather stupidly.

He was silent for some time, then he said, "The company's going to have to gear itself up for a very unusual promotion campaign."

"For Katherine? Gerry, it's all very well to convince you and me, but what about the board? They'll never put up the money."

"They will if we withhold the recordings by the famous composers. How about that! She was talking to me — well, us, at any rate. I think I need to make another phone call to New York."

Now five years later, it seems amazing that we could have worried about people being interested in Katherine. My own share of the recording

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profits could pay for a 747 airliner, with plenty left over. The twins have founded a university named after her, and she has been praised by everyone from the president to radical feminist groups. Strangely enough, she has been classed as a great virtuoso of the twentieth century, because that is when her public career began. The recordings have also produced an explosion of scholarship on nineteenth-century music, and on how its great composers intended their works to be played.

I could not have known all of that as the cab drove me away from the Vaud mansion later that morning, but I knew that the reel of tape that I held would cause a sensation in New York. The dawn was breaking as we drove down the Avenue Marceau and across the Seine on the way to Orly Airport, and the sky had cleared during the night, leaving the city clean and gleaming. To my surprise, the cabdriver was Canadian, and spoke English.

"The start of a beautiful day, eh?" he remarked. "Even in winter the Old Lady can be pleasant sometimes. On mornings like this I always think something marvelous will begin."

I agreed, smiling all the more because today what he said was true. Katherine had challenged Time and Death themselves with her silvered glass disks and clockwork machine, and just when it seemed that she was beaten, along came Rico Tosti and Gerry Searle with their laser pickup heads, digital analyzers, and computer programs. Tired and proud, like some minor hero in a great legend, I fancied that I was holding hands with the newly awakened Katherine.

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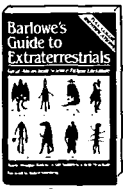

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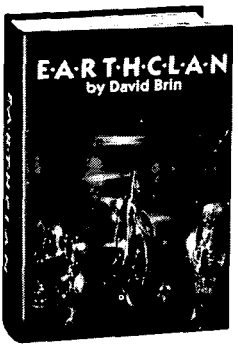

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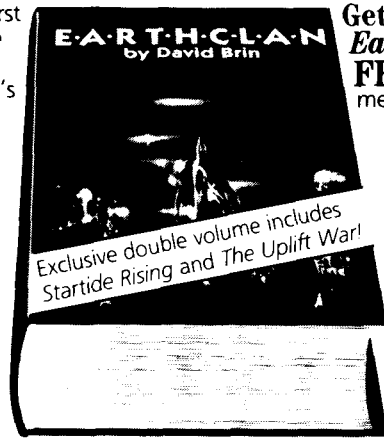

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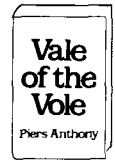

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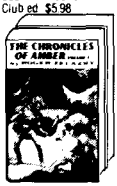

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